Baroque Practice

Historically Informed Style

by Charles Asch

If you have students who are playing baroque or classical repertoire, this article contains some helpful hints to help their playing sound more "H.I.P." "H.I.P" stands for "historically informed performance," a musical movement that grew during the 20th century to recreate more closely the techniques, style and instrument construction that may have been common during the Renaissance, Baroque and Classical eras in music. To be "historically informed" means to use information contained in methods and descriptions of playing from the musical era of the work, and to apply it judiciously to the work performed. Historically informed performance can also mean to seek instruments to perform on that are constructed and set up similarly to those from the era in question. Naturally, complete authenticity can never be established, for it is an elusive goal, but it never hurts to learn more about contemporaneous accounts of performance style and instrument construction.

For the typical student working their way through a *Suite for Unaccompanied Cello* by J.S. Bach, or a violinist in their high school orchestra performing the orchestra part of a Vivaldi violin concerto, there are a few helpful hints to quickly apply some common practices derived from the historically informed performance movement to their playing, which I will elucidate below. These elements can apply to solo pieces as well as to ensemble pieces to freshen them up, or to provide a contrasting style from Romantic and 20th century music. The following list is based upon performing practices I have encountered as an active player in period ensembles in the Twin Cities such as Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bach Society of MN, The Wolfgang, and other period ensembles:

1) Vibrato is an ornament and should not be used unless it adds something to the sound or expression.

Here is the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001)* on vibrato in the baroque era: "During the Baroque era, vibrato was used sparingly, for emphasis on long, accentuated notes in pieces with an affect or character to which it was suited." Within the role of soloist, more vibrato is acceptable, as is more ornamentation generally, however amongst the ripieno or orchestra parts, too much ornamentation leads to less unity and clarity in the sound.

2) Notes should be played with noticeably unequal emphasis, especially in 8th note and 16th note passages.

In his 1752 method *On Playing the Flute*, the renowned composer and court musician Johann Quantz includes an entire section on "Of Good Execution in General in Singing and Playing," which outlines the importance of beat hierarchy, using the common terminology of "good" and "bad" notes:

> "You must know how to make a distinction in execution between the principal notes, ordinarily called struck or in the Italian manner, good notes, and those that pass, which some foreigners call bad (schlimme) notes. Where it is possible, the principal notes always must be emphasized more than the passing. In consequence of this rule, the quickest notes in every piece of moderate tempo, or even in the Adagio, though they seem to have the same value, must be played a little unequally, so that the struck notes of each figure, namely the first, third, fifth, and seventh, are held slightly longer than the passing, namely the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth, although this lengthening must not be as much as if the notes were dotted."

Here, Quantz provides an example of where the odd numbered notes should be played with more emphasis than the even numbered notes. This emphasis can consist of both weight and metrical time given to the emphasized note:

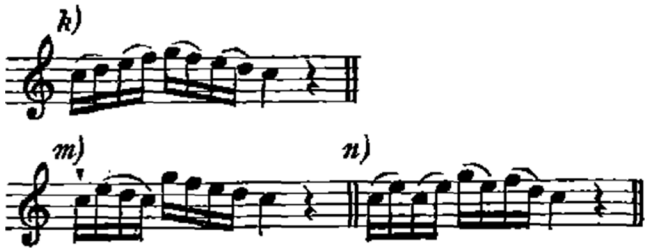

Image 1

Specifically, in the examples of *k*, *m* and *n* in Image 1, Quantz says, "If the eight sixteenth notes are played slowly with the same value, they will not sound as pleasing as if the first and third of four are heard a little longer, and with a strong tone, than the second and fourth." Specifically excepted from this rule is "quick passage-work in a very fast time in which the time does not permit unequal execution, and in which length and strength must therefore be applied only to the first of every four notes." This means that fast sixteenth notes would only receive emphasis on the first of every four. Also excepted are "notes above which strokes or dots are found," or "when several notes follow on another upon the same pitch," or "when there is a slur above more than two notes."

In fact, a rhythmic inequality of the notes can be performed, called inégalité, where the first note is metrically lengthened at the expense of the second note, resulting in a rhythm that is "not so much as if the notes were dotted." Here, Quantz is alluding to notes inégales, a tradition similar to swing in Jazz, where eighth notes are played with an almost "tripletized" rhythm. The tradition applies to a greater degree to French baroque music than those of other nations. Within historically informed ensembles, there are certain dances and styles where inégalité is applied less. A passage containing stepwise motion may be performed inégal when the notes are stepwise, then return to equal value when the notes are separated by an interval greater than a whole step. Certain dances do not comport with notes inégales, such as the Allemande, while the Minuet, Gavotte and French Courante delight in the addition of this characteristic lilt.

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3) There should be a clear beat hierarchy both within a measure, as well as across measures.

The rules on "good" and "bad" notes from above apply to metrical emphasis within the measure, as well as to metrical emphasis across measures. I could quote passages from the methods of Lully, C.P.E. Bach, Türk, Quantz and Leopold Mozart alluding to this, but I prefer here to rely on my practical experience in period ensembles to make it simple to apply and understand. If you have a passage such as in Image 2 below, which derives from Quantz, it is very important to play specifically in this manner. I encourage cellists to try the passage below and apply these techniques to sound like a true basso continuo player!

- In measures 1, 2, 3 and 6, the first beat is the "best" beat. We use this term "best" to indicate that this beat should be played more strongly than the others. In common time, the 1st and 3rd beats are emphasized, but the 1st beat is generally emphasized more than the 3rd beat. Therefore, the metrical structure of ms. 1-3 could be termed "best-bad-good-bad" for beats "1-2-3-4", the "best" beat receiving the most emphasis, and "good" beats receiving the second most emphasis. Emphasis can be achieved by length of articulation as well as volume.
- Measure 1 should be played more strongly than m. 2, and m. 3 should be played more strongly than m. 4. This is termed "strong" and "weak" measures, where the inequality between two beats is extended to inequality between measures. A metaphor I use for this is the battery, which is powered by a "+" and "-" charge.

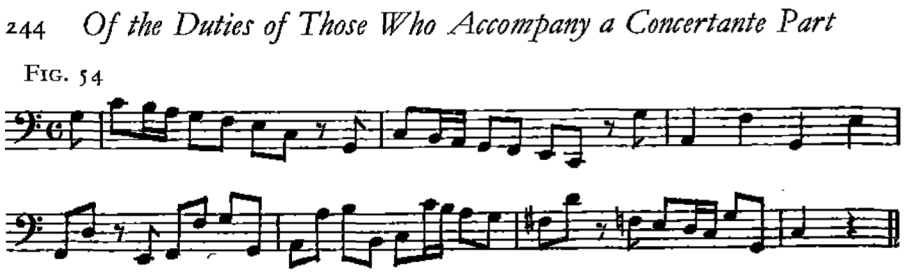

Image 2

- Where there is a sequence, in which part of the bass line moves stepwise on the same motive, the emphasis and volume should grow (or sometimes diminish), rather than conform to the above convention or strong and weak measures. The passage from m. 4-5 is a sequence, if you examine the bass notes, which ascend E-F-G-A-B-C. This means each statement of the lower bass notes should be louder than the prior. This crescendo is not to be continuous, as the off-beat eighth notes should still be less emphasized than those eighth notes falling on the beat. In fact, due to metrical displacement of the "best" beat to the 3rd beat of measure 3, the upper voicing of the bass line from the upper part of bass clef F-G-A-B-C could be "less loud" than those notes in the bass register. A crescendo in baroque music is generally terraced in this manner, with sequences begetting an increase in volume (or at times a decrease), while still holding to the rule of principal and passing notes, or strong and weak beats. The simultaneous interworking of various rules of performance in baroque music are necessary to achieving the complex, terraced sound demanded by this repertoire.
- Where the metrical emphasis shifts, as in m. 4–7, the 1st beat will no longer be the "best" beat. It's important to note where the common pattern of beat emphasis shifts in musical statements, and especially in syncopations, in order to bring out instead the normally "weak" beats.

There are notable further details to this rule of "good" and "bad" beats, which can also be described as accented and unaccented, strong and weak, principal and passing. "Weak" is not bad, rather it is the most important part of good performance, with a release from the need to accentuate and a feeling of continuance. If a passage is in $\frac{3}{4}$, the metrical accentuation is generally "strong-weak-weak." In a Sarabande, both the first and second beats are often strong, with the 2nd beat sometimes stronger than the first. The Sarabande at the end of this article is an example to which this exceptional metrical emphasis can be applied. It is important to note that the first beat in a Sarabande is not necessarily weak, as it is often a chord requiring suitable emphasis to execute. The second beat continues the strength of the first beat, at times surpassing it.

4) Notes which are separated by more than a whole step should be played more detached, and notes which are stepwise should be played more smoothly with a sense of line. Original articulations must be preserved where possible.

In his method, Quantz mentions that "good execution must first of all be true and distinct," and that "you must avoid slurring notes that ought to be articulated, and articulating those that ought to be slurred." Flowing from this assertion is the assumption that one ought to use the editions and manuscripts closest to the composer, rather than edited parts, which alter these original bowings and articulations. Some articulations and slurring can be added on a subjective basis, but not so much as to alter the original character of articulation.

In general, notes that are stepwise should be more joined, but as Quantz warned, they must not sound "glued together"—a subtle difference that will bring about a more baroque sound even in stepwise lines. To master this subtle instruction for not overly joining even stepwise notes can take some judicious application. In Image 3 below, from the *12 Violin Sonatas Op. 5* by Corelli, the *Sonata No. 9 in A Major* contains a beautiful *Tempo di Gavotta*, where the basso line will be more joined for stepwise notes than for non-stepwise notes. The violin part, in turn, with quarter notes separated by intervals of 4ths and 6ths, will have greater space between notes to allow ringing between quarter notes. The rules of inequality between principal and passing beats, between "good" and "bad" beats, continue to apply. This means that while the opening five eighth notes of the basso part would hang together, there would actually be a slight diminuendo over the course of them. This diminuendo would not be continuous, as the third eighth note would receive more emphasis than the second eighth note in the basso. See how these rules all fit together?

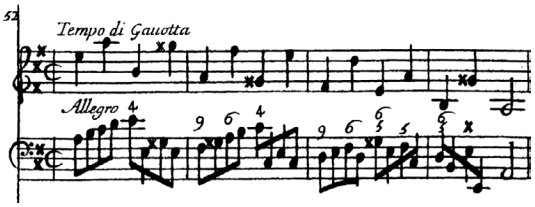

Image 3

5) Notes should be grouped and separated with small commas

While the metrical structure and tactus of the above allegro must be maintained, there should be a small comma before the last three 8th notes of the first measure in the basso. This holds true for the following measure as well. Because one does not want to interrupt the steady beat of the bass line, this can be achieved by making the high E in the first measure of the basso *lighter and shorter* prior to the start of the next group. Measure 2 is the same in terms of grouping. In measure 3 however, there would be a short comma before the fourth eighth note, which would entail lightening the F sharp prior to the D. In this case, the rule of grouping *overrides* the rule of "strong-weak" because groupings of 3 notes or 3 beats are grouped as "strong-weak-weak".

6) "The slur applies to all of the notes included under its trace. Patterns of two and four slurred notes are played with a slight, scarcely noticeable increase of pressure on the first and third notes. The same applies to the first notes of groups of three. In other cases, only the first of the slurred notes is played in this manner." – C.P.E. Bach in *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*

Slurs must be considered note groupings, which lighten on the last note to preserve their sense of grouping and to enable a slight separation from that which follows. The legato within a slur must be completely preserved without even a hint of portato, or pulsation between pitches. With baroque bows, slurs will especially tend to diminish in volume on down bows, which can be kept in mind on modern bows. It is this quality in the difference of equipment that is most notable when one does not have access to a bow that is closer to bows typical of the baroque era. Beginning from the bows designed by Tourte, which proliferated in the late 1700s, legato slurs became more sustained as the Tourte bow enabled more swelling of the sound even in the upper portion of the bow.

6) The "Affekt" and accompanying "Tactus" of the movement of the piece must be foremost.

In baroque music, the interpretation of the performer is not foremost, but rather the alignment of the artist with the form. As such, baroque music frequently contains movements with names like Gavotte, Allemande, Bourrée, Sarabande or Prelude. These are forms which were familiar to musicians of the time through things such as dance and custom, though many were no longer danced. For every baroque or classical work, it is important to research the dance or custom which informs the movement. This will inform the tempo, or tactus of the movement. In addition, in keeping with the baroque obsession with passions and Affektenlehre, the discreet moods and affects of the piece must be brought out with great clarity.

There will be parameters around the typical speed a Sarabande is performed, the tactus, which is generally quicker than typically performed by a modern interpreter not familiar with the baroque Sarabande. For instance, in the *Suite for Unaccompanied Cello in G Major* by Bach, the Sarabande is often taken quite slowly, to maximize the ability of the cellist to draw a tone from the cello. However, when one investigates historical descriptions of the Sarabande, while the dance is slow and stately, there are steps within the dance which are more flowing, and the tempo must also allow this. Perhaps the tone can be drawn, while preserving the sense of motion from the Sarabande of the French court, which though it was no longer danced by the 1700s, the memory of the flowing motion remained. The following description of a dancer performing the Sarabande is taken from an article called *Audible rhetoric and mute rhetoric: the 17th-century French Sarabande* by Patricia Ranum, which contains a translation of a French music dictionary entry from 1671 by Father François Pomey:

> "At first he danced with a totally charming grace, with a serious and circumspect air, with an equal and slow rhythm, and with such a noble, beautiful, free and easy carriage that he had all the majesty of a king, and inspired as much respect as he gave pleasure. Then, standing taller and more assertively, and raising his arms to half-height and keeping them partly extended, he performed the most beautiful steps ever invented for the dance. … Sometimes, with the most beautiful timing in the world, he would remain suspended, immobile, and half leaning to the side with one foot in the air; and then, compensating for the rhythmic unit that had just gone by, with another more precipitous unit he would almost fly, so rapid was his motion."

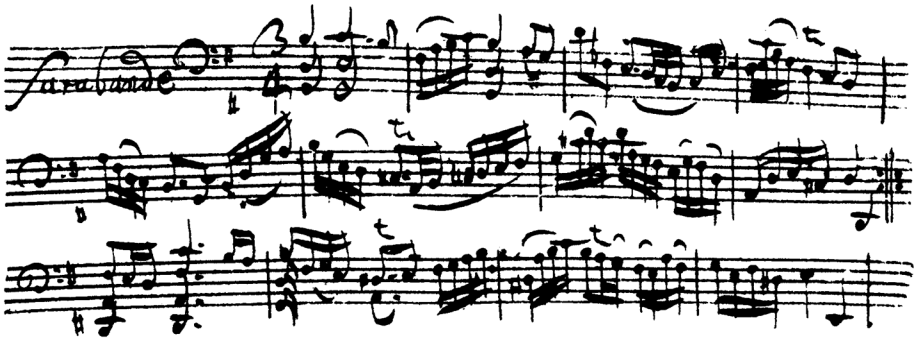

Image 4 — *Sarabande* from *G Major Cello Suite* by Bach

Dr. Charles Asch performs on both a baroque and modern cello. On the baroque cello he has performed with Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bach Society of Minnesota and Bach Roots Festival, as well as participating in chamber music programs featuring music of the baroque and early classical throughout the Twin Cities. Dr. Asch completed his D.M.A. at University of Minnesota, his M.M. at Juilliard, and his B.M. at Northwestern University. He has studied with Tanya Remenikova, Hans Jorgen Jensen, Richard Aaron and Jaap ter Linden. His doctoral thesis at UMN was focused on researching one of the first cellists in the latter part of the 19th century to exclusively perform with an endpin, Karl Davydov.