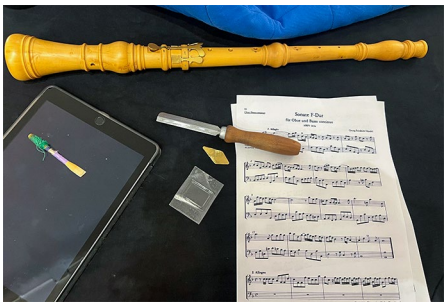
Baroque Practice

Händel's *Bourrée anglaise*

by Charles Asch

I recently had the pleasure of reading through parts of Händel's *Oboe Sonata in F major* with two baroque musician colleagues, oboist Curtis Foster and harpsichordist Tami Morse. The fourth movement of this Sonata, the *Bourrée anglaise*, is the source material for the final piece in Suzuki *Cello School: Volume 2*. Recently, as a teacher I have become interested in giving students more access to source material, because the editorial markings are distracting to the original design of the pieces they are playing. Questions also arise from students on the dynamic and expressive markings, as well as on fingerings and bowings. I find it refreshing to inform students that they are reading from a heavily edited, interpretive edition, which is based on the work by Händel, but that the markings they see throughout are not part of the original design of the work by Händel.

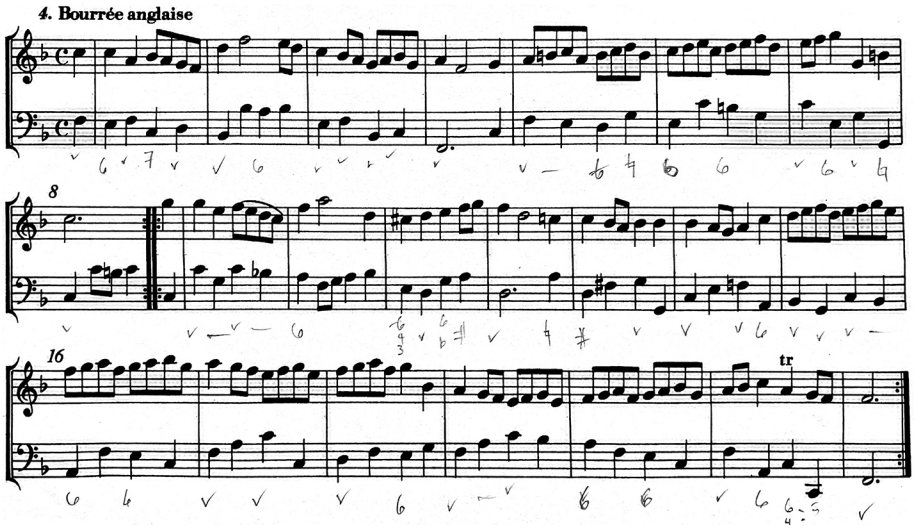
The *Bourrée anglaise* is the fourth movement of the five movement *Sonata in F major HWV 363a*, composed circa 1711-16 by George Frideric Händel. This is just prior to Händel's triumphant premiere of *Water Music*, composed for King George I for the performances on the Thames River. What makes the *Bourrée anglaise* especially English I do not know, except that it was likely composed in England after Händel had left his post in Hanover, Germany. The work was composed with the oboe as it was designed at the time, so a performance on baroque oboe is especially salient, and should inform the way another instrument plays this same melody. The work is composed for oboe and basso continuo, which usually implies the participation of a keyboard instrument and a bass instrument. In the case of my reading ensemble above, the basso continuo group was harpsichord and cello, though it is conceivable for the group to include lute, viola da gamba or even bassoon. Generally, the minimum is to at least have an instrument able to play chords above the notated bass notes, which is done using a practice called *figured bass*. In Example 1, you can see the figures which Tami has added below the bass notes



A baroque oboe, tools and music

I especially requested to add this movement into our reading, so at a moment's notice Tami added these figures in, to help her chords to be correct. Generally speaking, harpsichordists are given only the bass notes of what they are to realize with both hands. They add in chords and the right hand based on figures below the bass notes, called figured bass. While some composers or editions will indicate the figured bass, in this case it is up to the harpsichordist to add in the correct figures. The oboe player plays the melody indicated on the upper line, while the harpsichordist elaborates the bass line with chords, and even small countermelodies, harmonies or responses to the melody in the right hand. As the cello player, I simply perform the bass line as indicated, with variations in how I articulate and group the notes. A bolder cellist might perform further elaborations on the bass line, without overshadowing the oboist. The oboist can also add embellishments such as trills, appoggiaturas and grace notes into the melody, especially on repeats. In this sense, baroque and early classical sonatas have much in common with contemporary practice for reading jazz charts, where the ensemble reads off a *lead sheet* with the melody and chords indicated.

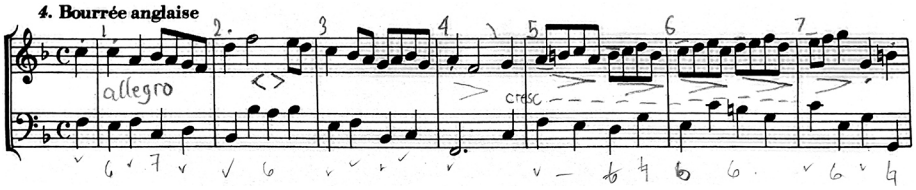
There is considerable interpretive freedom in how harpsichordists realize and embellish the figured bass. I can give an extremely cursory explanation of the figures here, but for more details you would have to ask a professional harpsichordist such as Tami. Some of the symbols she used here are her own, such as the check marks and lines, but the numbered figures are universal for baroque practice. Here is my brief explanation: a check mark means just normal triad in the key signature a third and a fifth above; 6 means to play a 6/3 inversion chord above the bass note; 7 means to play a 7 chord above the bass note; a line means the chord remains the same; a slash through a 6 means to play a raised 6th one semitone above the key signature; a natural sign means to make the 3rd in the chord natural; a 6/4 means to play a 6/4 inversion above the bass and so on. The notations were developed by keyboard players throughout the 1600–1700s and are



Example 1: *Bourrée anglaise* with figures

actually quite logical and brief once you understand them. Composers from Scarlatti to Beethoven used figured bass in their training, until it began to wane as a primary practice during the 1800s.

In our reading session on the *Bourrée anglaise*, I asked Curtis to take the tempo he would take; just "play it how he would play it." Curtis performs as a baroque oboist throughout the world with extensive experience in period-style ensembles, so I was

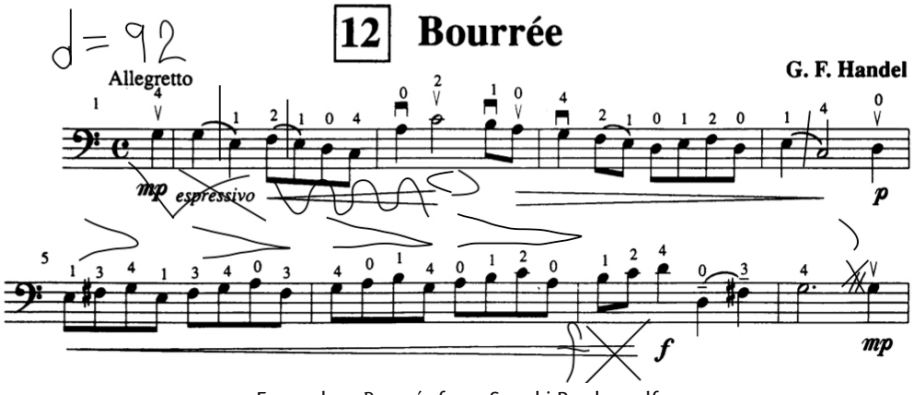


Example 2: Line 1 of *Bourrée anglaise*

really interested to hear how he performed the work. Our tempo was considerably faster than you can usually hear in most performances by student violinists and especially cellists, with a much more jovial, light feel. Curtis mentioned that the bourrée is a leaping dance with a spirited feel, and Tami mentioned that she has even seen me dance bourrées before, so I should know! I measured our tempo as ♩=92, which remains felt as the pulse aside from slight slowdowns at cadences and for breath between phrases. The biggest difference is that Curtis' articulations were much lighter than you might typically hear on this melody, with light articulatory separations between the 1st and 2nd beats of measure 1, as is common practice in baroque style. In addition, in measures 5–7 Curtis performs the crescendo in note groupings, rather than as a simple crescendo. This note grouping also lends a certain *inégalité* to the 8th notes, where the first of every four notes is lengthened slightly, and note pairs are performed often with a slight lilt, like a *jazz swing* but less so. I have indicated some of these note groupings, which contain decrescendos within crescendos in Example 2. I have also indicated where some notes are shorter, such as on upbeats and prior to interval leaps.

I told Curtis about my discomfort with how the Suzuki edition indicates a constant crescendo from measure 5-7. The source for this music contains no crescendo, though an overall crescendo is understood. Curtis solved some of my anxiety by saying, "it's just a more complicated crescendo," and indicated that an attentive teacher could simply inform their student the more complex reality of crescendos in the baroque style, always with small diminuendos by note grouping. Most vexing to me as a teacher however, is having to lop off the end of that crescendo in this edition, specifically in measure 7. In baroque practice, the highest note is not necessarily the loudest, but rather the note that begins the note grouping. As the three pitches (E-F-G for oboe and B-C-D for cello) in measure 7 form a stepwise note group, there should be a slight tapering in dynamic in these three pitches, rather than a crescendo.

Example 3 is my work in "de-editing" the Suzuki edition. You will notice lines breaking the slurs in measures 1 and 4. In addition, I have scribbled out the crescendo



Example 3: *Bourrée* from Suzuki Book 2.pdf

in ms. 1, and indicated a *messa di voce* with the 2nd beat of measure 2. The *messa di voce* is commonly applied on longer notes in the baroque era, and implies a swelling and diminishing of the sound, not necessarily symmetrical. You almost have to hear an oboist perform it, to understand it. In this case, the sound could inflate quickly, almost accent-like, with a slight diminuendo. This creative shaping can occur differently, in different contexts.

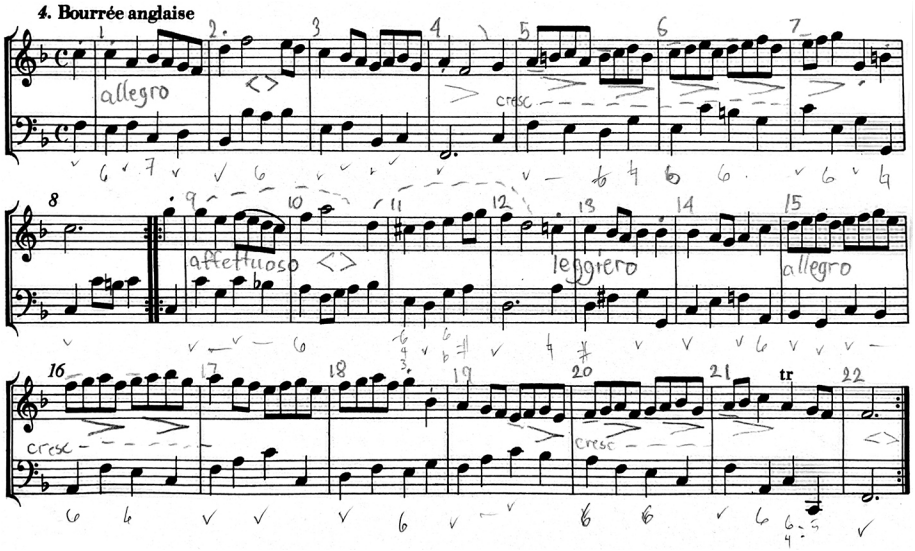
In ms. 5–7 I've indicated the diminuendos in the 4-note 8th note groupings as discussed above. I also moved the top of the crescendo forte to the start of measure 7, rather than in the middle of that same measure. These dynamic shapings and articulations are not trivial to the proper feel and playful nature of the solo line.

In a proper edition for students of this work, there would be no expression marks and no dynamic marks, and no articulation marks. Practices in baroque style and dynamics can be explained in examples prior to this piece, and should be a part of music education. If a student asks, you can add in dynamic or articulatory marks, as needed. The solo line should always be presented with the *basso continuo* below it as it was for centuries, because it helps the melodic player to understand the context of the melody. Un-altered editions informed by historical performing practices should be the basis of musical learning.

Before closing, I want to mention the importance of *Affekt* in performing works from the baroque era. In particular, this short little *Bourrée anglaise* contains at least three *Affekten. Affekt* is a German-term, related to our English word "affect." An *Affekt* is a specific emotional or spiritual state of being, that is portrayed in music for an entire movement, or for specific sections of a movement, sometimes even for only a single phrase grouping. The movements of this *F major Sonata*, consisting of a sentimental *Adagio*, a spirited *Allegro*, a rueful D minor *Adagio*, followed by this cheerful *Bourrée anglaise*, and a positively bubbling *Menuet* to close, help to give the sonata both balance and dramatic arc. The *Bourrée anglaise* is a sudden intrusion of happiness and exuberant drive, almost echoing Händel's life-changing decision to move to England to compose and reside there.

Within this little bourrée, I have marked three expression marks below, *allegro*, *affettuoso* and *leggiero*. I would not place this in an official student edition, but Example 4 simply serves to show how a teacher could indicate these shifts in *Affekt*. While the opening section is cheerful, *Allegro*, the portion from measure 9 is perhaps a bit more expressive, even *Affettuoso*, "passionate or loving." In my reading with Curtis, from measure 9 on he played suddenly more connected between notes, with a greater sense of swelling within the phrase. Sud-

denly, in the pickup to measure 13 he plays more lightly, which I indicate below with *leggiero*, to play with a lighter, more delicate and graceful touch. Perhaps *giocoso*, "joking," could even more accurately represent the *Affekt* here. After this slight sentimental remembrance, the piece returns to the original allegro *Affekt*. This helps to give this music a rhetorical shape, and gives the listener variety. In this way, one can hope that both the performer and listener experience the emotional and spiritual states that music can bring.



Example 4: Affekten - *Bourrée anglaise*

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 Jørgen 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.