

On the stylistic context of the preface to the organ
voice book of the

Cento Concerti Ecclesiastici

by

LODOVICO GROSSI DA VIADANA

Bernhard Lang

The preface to Lodovico Viadana's *Cento Concerti Ecclesiastici* is the first extensive instruction on the new *basso continuo* playing in the music of the early Italian baroque, being so to say the first mile stone on the epoch which has been called *Generalbass-Zeitalter*, i.e. *basso continuo epoch* by Hugo Riemann. To stay in this image, the first mile stone is not to be found at the very beginning but after the first mile. As well, the *basso continuo* has its precursor, however, there is no precise starting point. The beginnings of playing and singing together, as to be found at the end of renaissance, are hidden in the dark of music history.

The handed down music from before 1600 contains hardly no instructions on the performance. Especially, there are practically no hints about use of specific instruments. However, are a couple of instructions from the 16th century about how to arrange composed music (as opposed to improvised music) for lute and keyboard instruments is conserved, as well as how to ornament composed parts when playing a melody instrument. Moreover, a large number of such intavolations and ornamented works is preserved in printings and manuscripts. A clear, though indirect hint on the usage of instruments in sacred music is provided by paintings of angel choruses, which start to be supplemented by angle orchestras from the middle of the 14th century on. Especially in Venice we find drawings which depict already 200 years in advance about the situation as it is described for the time of G. Gabrieli [11, p.88f]. Even though the meaning of these paintings is mostly symbolic, it is hard to imagine that during such a long period there should not have been any attempt to realise such a symbolic idea in practice on earth (as these symbols were painted by quite earthly painters).

As one finds only rare hints about how instruments have been used – except for the evidence, that they have been used at all – seen in the cold light of day, the situation is not much different for the vocal music. *That* music has been sung is evident, for what

else a text would have been supplied? But the placing is often inaccurate and incomplete. An where it is clear, an inner link between emphasis of music and pronunciation of the text is often absent.¹ Thus, a purely and exclusive vocal performance of the renaissance music as ideal form cannot be drawn from the preserved material. Such understanding of the renaissance music originates rather from a partly ideologically motivated search for a “pure music” in the 19th century, partly from a misunderstanding of “missing instrumental parts”. It can be regarded as an irony of history that the term *a cappella music* which has been formed at that time, is in fact based on instructions as *in genere da cappella* as opposed to *in stil concertato* or *a voce sola* etc., which announce that here, the full *cappella* should sing and play in a sense of tutti, including all instruments. The term is thus mostly used for the biggest ensemble in polyphonic music and is associated with a various and mixed sound.

A better understanding of the music of the renaissance may be gained by taking into account that the music, composed upon rules of counterpoint with its proportions in rhythm and intervals, was thought as reflecting the structure of the universe given by god. Similar to the distinction between the world’s principal structure (which is *per se* “simple” and clear because it is given by God) and its more chaotic every day appearance, also writing down music following the “pure” rules and its performance were two different things without being opposed, in a quite “natural” way. The composer writes the “the music itself”, called *res facta*. The responsibility of the performers is the realisation of this music, including ornamentation and “instrumentation”, the *musica ficta*. Thus, composed music does not fit to the categories vocal or instrumental. It is either both or none, since this category belongs to the performance, not to the music “itself”. Max Schneider writes in his basic work on the beginnings of basso continuo [10] *that one should [...] assume a common [instrumental and vocal] litterateur at least since the imitated music is established in the so called a cappella vocal style (epoch Okeghem-Josquin ca. 1475 bis 1525). Since many things point towards that but nothing crucial against.* This has basically not changed since the publication in 1918.

A musician was expected to be able to invent the realisation on the spot, as far as the voices were not doubled. In addition to the ornamentation of a given melody, the improvised (quasi) counterpoint was important, the *contraponto alla mente*, also much practiced in teaching. This means to be able to improvise a voice in addition to another given voice. In the ensemble one could add an unlimited number of voices to the *canto fermo*, most easy when the latter was the bass. The most important rule was to stay always in consonances with the bass. Intermediate clashes of different improvised voices were regarded as a special beauty of this technique. This tradition is still described by Adriano Banchieri [6, p.230] who gives a set of ten *osservazioni* how to write such a piece

¹The unspecific handling of the text in the (sacred, so to say official) music of the renaissance stands in great contrast to the vocal music of the early baroque, where the unity of text and music is the most important characteristic. This direct relationship evolves only during the 16th century, especially by composers in Rome like Palestrina and Viadana, and goes in parallel with the development of specific instrumental music. It will turn out that Viadana’s innovation is especially the reaction on this developing diversity into explicit vocal and instrumental part the of music.

which looks only complicated, but is based on very simple rules. Thus, we can assume that the trained musician in the 16th century was able to invent new and accompanying voices to given music. The organist was even expected to improvise complete polyphonic accompaniments in counterpoint style to a given cantus firmus.²

As already mentioned, the intavolation, a sort of reduced score for playing, compiled from the voice books, played an important role. In such a way, the composed music was adapted to the actual needs of the instrument, either to play these voices as accompaniment or to make a new instrumental piece out of it. From the collections of intavolutions made by or for the organist which have been preserved aside the voice books (e.g. Bresslau intavolation [12]) it is evident that such intavolutions have indeed been used also for accompanying and not only for solistic instrumental music. Here we find ourselves quasi at the branch-off into the direction of an original instrumental music which is developing from the intavolutions, simplified and adapted scores for the use on the instrument and then again ornamented but now more specifically for the actual instrument. This adaption of the *res facta* to the technical demands of the organ, the harpsichord, the lute, the harp etc. causes often faults with respect to the counterpoint rules which originate from the resolution of voice crossings. Thus, polyphonic counterpoint is transformed into a chord-like structure which presumably were to be found at all times, but which is thought to be less valuable in the treatises of the 16th century. We find the advice, the pupil should diligently study the composed music of the grand masters but avoid the pieces of the instrumentalists which are full of faults. For instance, if we have a look on the written out accompanying voices in the treatise of Diego Ortiz [1], published in 1553, we won't remark a big difference to the later practice of a thorough bass in chords. However, for the harpsichordist of the 16th century it was not necessary – and this is the crucial difference to the later praxis of figured basses – to indicate a harmonic course (by figures), because this was quasi evident from the rules of *modal* music what had to be played upon a given bass voice (*contraponto alla mente*). Moreover, the chords in Ortiz' examples are a pure consequence of a voice leading according to a counterpoint note against note.

In later music, the key is determining the possible harmonic course in the form of cadence schemes from which the composer's art hat to form melodically expressive voices. As opposed to that, in the modal music of the renaissance the *modus* determined, besides the ground and recital note, quasi a collection of melodic pieces from which the voices could be built. It was the composer's task to put several voices (melodies) together such that a musically expressive harmony resulted. Thus, if one new the rules of composing, how to combine voices, there was no difficulty to invent any number of voices to a given one, if the latter did stay in the same mode. So to say, the two-dimensional coordinate system of music, melody and harmony, horizontal and vertical, has been turned by 90 degree during the age of the baroque. Harmony as consequence of the mutual moving superimposed voices has become melodic line as a consequence of the course of chords. And due to this fact, at the break of the modal order around 1600 it became necessary to assign by figures

²Recent studies show [16] that even improvisation of imitating counterpoint belonged to the standard repertoire of the skilled musician.

what had to be played as accompaniment upon a certain bass note, because differing from the tradition this was no more evident. A very clear overview on the characteristics of the (late) modal music is given in [13].

Knowing this, we may now ask about the stylistic context of Viadana's *Concerti*. On one hand does the figuring of the bass contain only accidentals but no digits. From this point of view we find him being still in the renaissance writing, with increasing tendency that already the composer wrote the accidentals, thereby adding them to the *res facta*, i.e. to the composition itself. Especially by German authors Viadana has been regarded as the inventor of the thorough bass for long time. This bases on the work of the zealous publisher Nicolaus Stein in Frankfurt who published Viadana's *Concerti* in 1613 with several following reprints as *Opera omnia sacrorum concertum 1, 2, 3, et 4 voc.* To the German translation of the preface he added a latin version. The errors contained therein stayed for long in the corresponding German literature and several works in the 20th century tried to disprove Viadana's supposedly erroneous claim on the authorship. The practice of a contiguous bass voice (*basso continuato*) which follows the lower border of the sound (*basso seguente*), the practice of accompanying, either from a score-like intavolation, either improvised, existed already since some time. For example, with a polychoral work of Antonio Striggio in 40 voices, composed in 1587, one finds in the 41st voice *Basso cavato dalla parte più bassa. . .* the advice that this voice should be played by a trombone in the middle of the circle (of the performers) together with organ, lute and harpsichord or viol (cited after Max Schneider [10, p.67]), thus the "classic" instrumentation of the thorough bass. In such a situation it was the bassist's or organist's job to compile (*cavare*) such a bass voice from the voice books. Still Praetorius gives in his music encyclopedia *Syntagma Musica*, published in 1619, detailed advises how to proceed. And there, the origin of the term *basso continuo* or *basso continuato* is clearly shown once again. In a work of multiple voices, either polychoral, block like, or polyphonic there is not a single bass voice to be found. In contrast, the *function* of the bass may rather jump from one voice to another, depending on which voice is the actually lowest. Thus, the organist's or bassist's had to write a *continuous* voice which always followed the actually lowest voice.

Viadana's crucial idea was now to include such a voice directly into the composition, with partly obligate character, and thereby dividing vocal and instrumental part of the composition. The structure of the composition, however, remains entirely in the polyphonic tradition. The preface tells us that it became more and more use at the end of the 16th century to sing or play with few voices to the organ, but still using traditional many-voice polyphonic music, more or less adapted to the new needs. In that sense, Viadana's innovation is more a reform of the orthography which adapted the way of notating and composing to the new performance practice, by directly writing down what would be played anyway, but with less expertise, at is to be feared. Of course, his proceeding articulates also the now awakened interest in a way of composing which permits the audience to understand the text, which had been of minor interest before.

How should we now imagine the use of the organ in his *Concerti*? Presumably and essentially as in the examples from the time *before* the upcome of figured basses: with several voices by playing from an intavolation, as Viadana suggests in the sixth advice.

A good example of such an “arrangement”, here written by the composer himself, is to be found in Luzzasco Luzzaschi’s madrigal books [8]. With a single voice one can either imagine an accompaniment like the one shown by Ortiz, a relatively simple counterpoint, here and there somewhat “livened up”, or by supposing that the two given voices, the solo and the bass voice are two written down voices of a composition in four or five parts, where the organist has to invent the missing inner voices. Examples in which one is quasi forced to use this way of accompanying one may find still some decades later in the north of Italy, for example in Frescobaldi’s instrumental canzoni or in Cima’s famous *Sonata per Violino e Violone* where the written bass voice actually follows the insets of the different imagined alto and tenor voices, thereby and supported by clef changes jumping completely unmelodically from one voice texture to another. Some of Schütz’ *Kleine Geistliche Konzerte* follow also clearly this style of writing, only to write down the two outer voices of an imagined four- or five-voice counterpoint, letting the rest at will of the organist. Written out examples are again to be found in Luzzaschi’s oeuvre. But Viadana admits also that playing from the *partitura*, this is the bass voice which is *spartita*, i.e. the provided with bar lines, is much more comfortable. And only some years later, Agostino Agazzari [2] will dismiss the intavolation – still clearly preferred by Viadana – as being completely unnecessary. Defining “thorough bass” as improvised playing from a figured bass voice, Viadana is clearly to be found before the begin while Agazzari has already passed the threshold.

The twelve *Avertimenti*

In the first advice Viadana underlines that his *concerti* are tender, support adorning only in moderation and should be accompanied cautiously (second advice). Thereby it is remarkable that on one hand he demands not to add anything to the printed music, but on the other hand he asks for adorning with *accenti* and *passaggi* by the singers as well as by the organist. Those ornaments are obviously not regarded as changes or addition, they belong to the printed music, though they are not explicitly written down. One can imagine what performers would have eventually done without this advice, once they “added”.³

Important for the performance of the accompaniment on the organ is further the advice in the fourth paragraph. The request to play the cadences always at the pitch of the corresponding solo voice reflects the traditional way of accompanying which Viadana wants to be applied to his *concerti*. Ideally, the organist plays from the intavolation, as emphasised in the sixth advice, which is a more or less direct image of the composed piece, letting out the diminutions, as far as works with several voices are concerned. When the number of

³In the German tradition one distinguishes *wesentliche* and *willkürliche* ornaments, i.e. essential or intrinsic and at will. In contrast, today one often observes a rather indifferent treatment which bases on the general idea, here and there a simple trill would be sufficient for adorning and everything over and above that in historical sources should be regarded as exaggerations of the taste of the epoch. The question remains how much of this opinion originates in a search for pureness and simpleness of sound which profoundly misunderstands the historic relation between written down and performed music and which rather uses the handed down as matter of projection for own wishes.

(composed) voices is small, the organist invents the rest. In the twelfth advice, Viadana finally gives a hint how the organist should play, namely always in the texture of the accompanied voice(s). What he should play was not necessary to explain to the organist, since he knew perfectly according to the organist's normal formation. Only the last phrase seems to be in contradiction to the advice to play the cadences always at pitch. However, one has to keep in mind that firstly, with *cadence* Viadana does not mean a harmonic progression in the later sense, but a typical progression of voice leading, also called *clausula*, which acts as the end of a musical phrase and which may look quite different from mode to mode and from voice to voice. In the composition of renaissance these were quasi exceptions which broke or stopped the continuous and balanced flow of the music. During the 17th century, most early in Italy, two of them became dominating, the *cadenza di salto* and the *cadenza di grado*. These terms refer to the voice leading of the bass which either jumps in a leap of a fourth or fifth or descends gradually. These two cadence types will finally dominate all harmonic structures. But the *concerti* are still at the very beginning of this evolution and the term *cadenza* has to be understood as typical voice leading of single voices or pairs of voices which the organist should not double in another octave. And as exception Viadana mentions that in pieces with only high voices the cadences should be filled in the lower octave because this sounds better.

At this point one often encounters the statement that Viadana contradicts himself here, being an indication for an ambivalence even in his own practice and, thus, one would be free in the choice of the realisation – playing the cadences at pitch or not. I think that the supposition, contradictions in sources point to the ambivalence of the described subject, is not going far enough. It is hard to imagine that an author who has – according to his own words – put much effort into his work, should be lazy enough when publishing it not to realise that he contradicts himself within only two pages and 17 lines. In contrast, in such cases one should assume that there is something to be read “between the lines” and that the contradiction could be resolvable when looking into the context, thereby giving further insight into so far overseen stylistic richness. Apparently, Viadana is here just mentioning what is more or less obvious for him, namely that cadences ask independently from the actual voice leading for a certain fullness, as one can see from the statements of several authors to adorn especially the cadences (Ortiz: “clausulas”). Thus, one could understand this paragraph as pointing to the special function of the cadence in the upcoming epoch. The advice to fill the cadence, here by doubling the bass, is furthermore also to be found in Bianchardi's treatise [3]. It is left to be clarified if *cadenza per octava* could have been used here in the sense of a special cadence *type*, of a *cadence in the octave*.

In the fifth paragraph Viadana gives an advice appearing throughout the whole epoch of thorough bass, to be found in numerous sources in more or less explicit form [15], namely that entries in the form of a fugue should be doubled as written out by the composer. It can only be speculated where this rule originates from. One explanation could be that the ear is especially searching for structuring elements at the start of a section, to be able to classify the new material, similar to the tendency to be more sensitive to fluctuations of intonation and rhythm at important beats because these are established especially there. Such an origin would furthermore stand in the tradition of the modal music where the voices had

to show the typical elements of the actual mode like characteristic melodic patterns and jumps right at the begin of a piece [13].

As already mentioned, Viadana prefers playing from the intavolation against playing from the *partitura* since the former conveys much better the composed voices. The term *partitura* obviously stands here for continuo voice which traditionally had been prepared by a bassist or an organist – now it is given by the composer. It is derived from the Italian word *spartire*, i.e. to subdivide, and describes subdividing the voices by vertical lines in bar-like units – those who have already once transcribed a piece from handed down voice books into a modern score will know that this step is nearly indispensable in order to get an overview on how the voices go together. Varying from author to author the term *partitura* or *spartitura* is used for a voice supplied with bar lines, for a thorough bass voice or for an intavolation. Still today the Italian word *spartito* means “piano reduction”. Thus, the meaning of the (thorough bass) intavolation in the sense of a reduced score has been preserved until today.

Short time after the publishing of Viadana’s *concerti* one finds advices, some quite extensive, which stops of the organ should be used and how. The best known work among those is probably the magnificat of Monteverdi’s *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (an extensive overview on such sources is given in [14]). Therein Monteverdi asks quite often for a change of stops. Viadana’s seventh advice tells us that he obviously still thinks completely in terms of voices which can be enforced according to the need of the musical expression by increasing their number (adding “consonances”). As opposed to that, the in northern Italy and especially in Venice very popular polychoral music demands for largest possible contrast between the concerting groups, also as regarding the dynamics. Furthermore one has to keep in mind that Viadana’s *concerti* are exclusively compositions for few voices where a steady change of stops on the anyway very present organ are more offending.⁴

As already discussed, the eighth paragraph indicates that at the end of the renaissance we observe the increasing tendency to fix the accidentals already at the moment of composing. Formerly they had been counted to the *musica ficta*. The ninth paragraph treats the well known interdiction of parallel fifths and octaves, where Viadana allows quasi officially as composer the since long established practice to resolve voice crossings and thereby introduce some counterpoint faults. But he does not miss to underline that such faults must not appear in the composed voices. It follows the statement that the thorough bass must not be left out, so to speak as to prevent all misunderstandings concerning the widely used practice of playing in “excerpts” of polyphonic pieces in multiple voices. The eleventh paragraph treats the for the thorough bass practice less important question whether to use a countertenor or a boy, and the twelfth advice we have already discussed. Thus it is only left to me, to wish good health also to the today’s reader.

Bernhard Lang, Lausanne, January 2004

⁴For the use of organ stops c.f. also the discussion of Agostino Agazzari’s treatise and the comments on the registration advices in Monteverdi’s vespro.

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