CONTINUO PRACTICE FOR THE THEORBO
AS INDICATED
IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN PRINTED AND MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

3 VOLUMES

III: The New York Public Library Theorbo Manuscript (JOC 93–2)

THEODOROS KITSOS

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The New York Public Library Theorbo Manuscript

Source

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Tilden and Lenox Foundations: call no. JOC 93–2 [Introductio a note con terza maggiore e con terza minore e terza naturale].

Introduction

In seventeenth-century Italy, one of the most preferred instruments for continuo accompaniment was the theorbo. Its role was not restricted simply to a chordal accompaniment but, as Agostino Agazzari informs us, the theorbo had a second role, an ornamental one, namely the improvisation of diminutions above the bass. Due to the improvisatory nature of continuo, not many sources that illustrate the accompanying style exist; and if the sources that display chordal realizations are rare, the ones that demonstrate ornamented realizations are much rarer still.

However, both of these qualities are well presented in the New York Public Library theorbo manuscript, a lavish continuo tutor. The manuscript, before coming into the possession of New York Public Library, was owned by the music antiquarian Hans Schneider, Friedrich Chrysander (1826–1901), and Auguste Bottée de Toulmon (1797–1850), whose property stamp appears on f. 1. Nothing is known about the history of the manuscript prior to this point but it is almost certain that it is of Italian provenance and dates from the late seventeenth century.

The manuscript is written in Italian tablature and it was intended for a fourteen-course theorbo, with six fingerboard courses and eight diatonically tuned contrabassi, tuned in the following way:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The tuning of the bass courses is occasionally altered in order to fit the key in use and, in most of the cases, the alteration is indicated at the beginning of the section. The manuscript was compiled by someone with an in-depth knowledge of the instrument and its peculiarities, and with an indisputable educational purpose. However, it is remarkable that it does not display the typical compromises usually found in tutors intended for students or amateurs as, on several occasions, a high level of skill is required. Both the chordal and ornamental functions of the theorbo are demonstrated with an expertise that is usually found only in sources that contain solo music. The chordal examples contain realizations of complex harmonies and they occasionally bear designations such as durezze, arpeggio and ribattute, the ornamental examples are infused with a variety of effective features such as groppi, campane, strascini, or left-hand ornaments.

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The New York Public Library theorbo manuscript is a valuable document for modern players and scholars who want to comprehend the accompaniment style of seventeenth-century Italy. It not only provides practical tables with shapes of chordal realizations to be used by the theorbo player but, more importantly, it gives a consummate image of how the accompaniment can be enriched, which can be a guide for any instrumentalist.

Notes on notation and transcription
Although a transcription into modern notation does not completely re-ensemble the information provided by the tablature, it is essential for musicians who are unfamiliar with the tablature notation in order to access the musical context. For that reason both original notation and transcription are juxtaposed in a way that the original features and layout of the manuscript are preserved. The manuscript is in landscape format with two systems per page, with a five-line staff for mensural notation and a six-line tablature staff. Between them the transcription of the tablature has been inserted in modern notation.

With the exception of ff. 26'-27 (pp. 52-3 of the present volume), the tablature lacks any rhythmic signs. This is presumably because the rhythmic interpretation was left to the decision of the performer in relation to the musical texture the examples were to be applied to. For that reason, black stemless notation is employed for the transcription.

The manuscript displays five different ways of barring: there are single, double and triple barlines that are used in a way similar to today's fashion (with triple barlines equivalent to final ones); and two types of small vertical lines, one of two-space length and another of one-space length, which are used exclusively in ornamental realizations and presumably segment phrases and motifs respectively. The original barring has been retained in both the tablature and the transcription, with the exception of ornamented barlines that show the end of a thematic section, and which have been replaced by final barlines. Sections segmented by small vertical lines have been treated as full bars and where an accidental appears once, it applies also to the subsequent notes; however, due to the extended length of some of such 'bars', precautionary accidentals in round brackets are occasionally used.

The tablature contains various signs associated with performance which are not displayed in the transcription. The horizontal line (-) indicates that the theorbo player should hold the fingers of the left hand on the fingerboard as long as the line lasts in order to achieve the effect of campanella. The dot (●), when applied to a single note, indicates the pluck with the index finger of the right hand. Yet the use of multiple dots in a chord is ambiguous: while at first sight it points towards the plucking with index, middle and ring fingers, when it comes to four-note chords, although such an execution is accomplishable, it also seems rational to indicate the execution with one finger, possibly the index, in a strumming fashion. Pietro Paolo Melii described such a practice and he also used dots for its notation. The sharp-like symbol (♯) is a left-hand

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2 See, Pietro Paolo Melii, Intavolatura di liuto attiorbato, libro terzo (Venice: G. Vincenti, 1616; facs. edn., Florence: Studio Per Edizioni Scelte, 1979), f. 2'.

ornament, and as is evident from its use for all the three notes of a chord in f. 26 (p. 51), it can only denote the use of vibrato. The x-like symbol (x) is also a left-hand ornament and indicates the single or multiple alteration with the upper auxiliary note. This is evident in f. 21 where it is used on an open course accompanied by the number 2 which means that the auxiliary note is that of the second fret. The only sign carried into the transcription is that for the strascino (slur), which indicates that the right hand plucks only the first note in each course and the left hand slurs the remaining ones, because it usually—though not necessarily—indicates the musical phrasing.

As a final point, basso continuo figuring, abbreviated words, punctuation and spelling of the original have been retained and any editorial additions appear in square brackets.

Commentary

p. 4, first system, b. 5, tablature, second character of fourth line 7(d').

p. 9, first system, b. 4, tablature, both characters of third line 6(e'^b).

p. 9, first system, b. 7, tablature, third and fourth characters placed on fifth line providing f#.g.

p. 10, first system, tablature, b. 7, 0 placed on sixth line providing A.

p. 11, second system, tablature, b. 2, second line 2(f#).

p. 14, second system, tablature, b. 2, first line 6(d'^#).

p. 18, first system, tablature, b. 1, both 7 of third line placed on first and 7 of first line placed on first.

p. 19, b. 1, second system, continuo figuring, a symbol appears over 3 (possibly a sharp).

p. 22, b. 2, first system, tablature, characters of last chord one line lower.

p. 22, b. 4, first system, tablature, characters of last chord one line lower.

p. 23, second system, tablature, b. 1, second character of third line placed on second line (f).

p. 29, first system, tablature, b. 1, eighth course tuned to F#.

p. 43, course 8 tuned to F#, course i tuned to C#.

p. 48, first system, tablature, b. 2, second line 3 (g).

p. 49, second system, tablature, b. 1, first character of sixth line 2(B).

p. 54, course i2 tuned to B'.b.

p. 83, first system, b. 7, continuo figuring, 6 with sharp.

p. 87, first system, b. 8, tablature, characters of second chord two frets lower.

p. 96, second system, continuo figuring, 6 with flat.

p. 98, first system, b. 6, tablature, second character of second line 5(a^).
Introduzioni

a Note

Con Terza Maggiore, e Con Terza Minore e Terza Naturale
G. sol re ut con Terza Maggiore

durezze  arpeggio  ribattute  campanelle

passaggio
F. fa ut con Terza Minore.

gropppo campan. le

presto

durez. e  ribat. a  passag. o  presto

[15]
Abbellimenti

Sopra Note di Cadenze risolute

Con Quarta e Terza, e con Quarta, Terza e Settima, E Sesta risoluta con Quinta falsa, e Settima con Sesta.
Folio 14v contains no music or writing
Risoluzione di Settima e Sesta.
Passeggi

Sopra Note con Accompagnam.\textsuperscript{ti}

Et a Note di Cadenze.
Accompag.\textsuperscript{ti}

Sopra qual si voglia Note con ogni accidenti, Et in quante forme, modi, e Maniere possino trovarsi, e formarsi sopra la Tastattura di Tiorba.

Con Risolutione di Settime, e Seste legate, et unite.
[96]
### Tavola

**Introduzioni**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G. sol re ut Con Terza Maggiore</th>
<th>C. 2.</th>
<th>C. sol fa ut Con Terza Minore</th>
<th>C. 5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. la mi re Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 3.</td>
<td>E. la mi Con Terza Maggiore</td>
<td>C. 7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. fa b. mi Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 4.</td>
<td>E. la mi Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. fa Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 4.</td>
<td>F. fa ut Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. sol fa ut Con Terza Naturale</td>
<td>C. 5.</td>
<td>F. fa ut Con Terza Minore</td>
<td>C. 8.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbelimenti

Sopra Note di Cadenze risolute

Con Quarta e Terza, E con Quarta Terza e Settima.

<p>| | | |</p>
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</table>
Sopra Note risoluto

Con Sesta, e Quinta falsa


C. sol fa ut. Maggiore.          C. 13.          ——          ——
Sopra Note risolute Con Settima, e Sesta

**Passeggi**

*Sopra Note Con Accompagnam.*

*Et a Note di Cadenze.*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. sol fa ut.</td>
<td>C. 24.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accompagnamenti.

Sopra qual si voglia Note con ogni Accidenti, Et in quante forme, e Modi, e Maniere possino trovarsi, e formarsi sopra la Tastattura di Tiorba

Con risolutione di Settima, e Seste legate, et unite.

D. la sol re.
C. 35.  B. fa.
C. 43.

E. la fa.
C. 36.  B. fa b. mi.
C. 44.

E. la mi.
C. 37.  C. sol fa ut.
C. 45.

F. fa ut.
C. 38.  D. la sol re.
C. 46.

F. fa ut. Maggiore.
C. 39.  E. la mi.
C. 47.

li seguenti sono all'Ottav'altra.

G. sol re ut.
C. 40.  Risoluzione di Settime, e Seste

G. sol re ut. Maggiore.
C. 41.  legate, et unite.

A. la mi re.
C. 42.  Fine.
C. 48.