

# PASSAGGI

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SINCE the first installment of this article contained some controversial points, I would like to amplify them with a few historical references before looking at the technique involved in the performance of passaggi.

The use of passaggi reached its peak in Italy during the 1580's. The staunchest advocates of this style – Dalla Casa, Bovicelli, Bassano, Rogniono and others – have left us several important details regarding their performance practices. They state, for instance, that the player should *not* slow down when the note values become smaller, except at cadences, where a *ritardando* is allowed. (Incidentally, this refutes the current English contention that ritards were an invention of the 19th century!) Howard Brown maintains that by deciding how fast the passages of most rapid diminutions can be played, we can determine the tempo of the original madrigal, motet or dance, before the passaggi were added. But this is putting the cart before the horse. As I pointed out in the last *Newsletter*, the tempo of the model must be determined first, since the lute version is based upon it.

Here we must be wary of imposing the limitations of our performance habits – based in most cases on heavy, high-strung instruments designed to fill a concert hall – on music written for more intimate performances on instruments that were very lightly strung. There is good reason to believe that we cannot play 64th notes nearly as fast as the 16th-century virtuosi could. Mersenne tells of a violinist who could apparently play sixteen notes per second, and with separate bow strokes at that! Anyone doubting the possibility of such velocity need only listen to Nigel Rogers singing Rasi's "Indarno febo" (on Rogers' Archiv disc "Canti Amorosi") or to the cornetto playing of Bruce Dickey. Whether or not one can match the speed of Mersenne's violinist friend is unimportant: the point is that the speed of renaissance musicians on all instruments seems to have been pretty formidable. Our task is to learn how to increase our performance tempo enough to manage at least some of this fascinating repertoire. There is a substantial amount of lute music written in this florid style, from the duets of Terzi to the treble-ground duets of John Johnson and many Consort Lessons. The ornamented pieces published by Dalla Casa also work very well on the lute, especially those in the *viola bastarda* style.

The problems we encounter in the performance of passaggi are mental as well as physical. Many people rely on conscious attention to each movement of the hand while they are playing, and since it is highly unlikely that the brain can think fast enough to discriminate between the notes of a very fast run, this kind of technique limits their speed. Yet it isn't necessary to think of each note in a run in order to play it. The hand

movements, if they are carefully practiced and can be executed without the hesitation of a conscious intention, achieve the speed of reflex. It is then possible to think in groups of four or eight notes at a time, the individual notes in each group being performed subconsciously, as it were, by the hands.

This excerpt from the consort lute part to Monsieur's *Almaine* (in the Cambridge Ms. D.d. 9.33) is an excellent exercise with which to explore this concept. Try it first without the left hand, using a metronome set at  $\downarrow = 40$  to determine the tempo. Work at this speed until each movement of the fingers is clearly resolved and can be performed without hesitation. Then gradually increase the speed, always keeping the fingers as relaxed as possible. It is like learning a word that is difficult to pronounce: we must first repeat it several times rather slowly, until it is resolved into familiar movements of the mouth and breath. We can then reproduce it quickly by simply thinking of the whole word, which has become a continuous unit of several movements that no longer require conscious attention.

All that is needed at this point is a light, even texture, like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower. The individual notes are not important, though all should be cleanly struck. Don't try for volume at first: that is a completely different problem. The eventual performance tempo should be around  $\downarrow = 80$ , but don't try for that velocity until all lower speeds are wholly under control. It is best to work first at each increase in speed with the right hand alone, before adding the left.

The only remaining problem for the right hand in single-line playing occurs where the thumb must pluck a string above the string plucked by the index finger. This can be resolved with slow practice, making sure that even in this somewhat awkward position both courses are consistently struck in the middle – that is, sounding both strings of the course evenly. The context of such problem spots often puts the hands in a less-than-ideal position, so a little thought is required in fingering the preceding passage in order to make the string crossing as manageable as possible. It is sometimes desirable to impose an uncomfortable position on the hands before the string crossing, so that this more difficult motion can be fingered as accurately as possible: experimentation will reveal the amount of compromise necessary in each case.

The most important point to remember is that attentive, deliberate practice is the most productive. The finest players admit to being the slowest practicers, when indeed they are the fastest, most accurate performers.

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