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Rapid passaggi play a vital role in sixteenth-century lute music. However, they are easily misinterpreted when we forget to keep in mind their function.

Passaggi are a type of ornamentation, that is, they are notes added to an existing framework. The single notes of a passagio are of little importance. It is the contour that matters—along with the “goals”, those notes towards which a run is heading at any given time. These “goals”, usually the original pitches which the passaggi ornament, need to be brought out in performance. Therefore a fairly strict pulse should be adhered to, normally in whole notes, reflecting the original structure, with considerable freedom between these pulses. (The tactus spoken of by Renaissance theorists refers to the semi-breve or whole note in most modern transcriptions. In tablature, | equals ½ tactus.) The individual notes of a passaggio can then be of quite different lengths, even though they are notated equally.

The example below is a good case in point. To indicate that it is the pitch being ornamented, we must linger on the encircled a', and make up the lost time by playing each successive note a bit faster until reaching the c". Since the next principal note is b', we need to give the impression that the scale preceding it still represents c". This may be accomplished by lingering a bit on the high c", and starting the scale from the low c' fairly softly, with a crescendo to the b'.

In a larger sense, the whole first phrase is heading towards a', so that a build-up should occur towards that note. To

accomplish this, the lingering on each of the principal tones can be gradually shortened until about the asterisk, where one will want to drive towards the cadence. There are, of course, many situations which demand other kinds of phrasing, but these are among the most common in dealing with passaggi.

The tempo of any piece containing passaggi can be derived by deleting the ornamentation and learning the unembellished version as though it had never had any passaggi. It is common today to choose a tempo by determining the speed at which we can negotiate the fastest passages. However, this is contrary to what the composers intended. They had a framework, often a madrigal or a motet, and enhanced it by adding passaggi. We must first try to understand the framework before considering the ornamentation. After questions of phrasing, articulation, and tempo have been dealt with in terms of this framework, we can replace the passaggi, approaching them as a means of getting from one cornerstone to the next. Only then can we understand passaggi in the same light in which their creators did.

It is necessary, then, to approach pieces with a musical ideal in mind before we look at our technical deficiencies. Once the musical requirements of a piece are known, we will be able to develop our technique in the direction required. Starting from a technical point of view, as we are so often wont to do, insures that we will never grasp the composer's intentions. It is far better to change or cut out some passaggi that are too fast than to sacrifice the tempo of an entire piece for the sake of a few ornamental notes. Starting with the music is more frustrating, but it always results in more stylistic performances and ultimately in better technique.



GIOVANNI ANTONIO TERZI—*Intavolatura di Liutto . . . Libro Primo*

Reduction

(1593)

“... Un'altra Canzone del [Claudio Merulo da Corregio] ...”

Note bass imitation of reduction