Learning to Ornament Handel’s Sonatas Through the Composer’s Ears

Part 1: Rhetoric, Variation, and Reworking

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In the February 1988 issue of The American Recorder, one of us (David Lasocki) wrote on the philosophy of late Baroque ornamentation, offering guidelines for performers and promising a further article on “the ornamentation of a specific repertory of prime importance to recorder players: the solo sonatas of George Frideric Handel.” The present two-part article fulfills that promise.

One of the fundamental ideas in Lasocki’s article was that “musicians of [the Baroque era] were often composers or were at least trained in composition. Ornamentation was a type of composition, or rather, recomposition.” It is, we hasten to add, a mild type of recomposition that affects the surface of the music rather than the structure. Lasocki went on to discuss the purposes of ornamentation in the late Baroque era: masking a basic structure, giving the performer a chance to demonstrate inventiveness and judgment, adding verve and spontaneity to the performance, adding variety to multiple performances of a work, and meeting the expectations of the audience. He then noted that today “we may freely choose to adopt as many of the Baroque attitudes to ornamentation as we see fit for our own purposes. If we consciously choose to ornament as closely as possible in Baroque style, then our purposes in doing so will incorporate most of the purposes of that period.” Our article is dedicated to showing how you can learn to ornament Handel’s sonatas in this spirit, that is—as far as can be discovered from surviving sources—in the manner that Handel himself employed. In doing so we seek to encourage you not to ornament idly but to pay due respect to what Johann Joachim Quantz (1752) called “the good ideas that the composer has created with care and reflection.”

We therefore consider how Handel would have set about composing a piece of music on a given text or subject, and we discuss examples of variation, reworking, and written-out ornamentation in his works, offering exercises for the reader. We also take a critical look at some eighteenth-century examples that have been regarded previously as models for the ornamentation of Handel’s sonatas. In addition we hope to demonstrate that a compositional approach to ornamentation produces insights into the performance of the sonatas.

For two reasons we pay at least as much attention to Handel’s vocal music as to his instrumental music. First, his main preoccupation as a composer was with vocal music—initially, Italian opera; later, English oratorio. Second, Handel used the same or similar melodic material freely in his vocal music and in his sonatas. In the late Baroque era, in any case, instrumental music, having gained independence from vocal music only a century or so earlier, could still be dependent on words.

The rhetorical approach to composition

Since ornamentation is surface recomposition, we need to look first at what went through the mind of a composer like Handel when he set out to write a piece of music. According to the classical author Quintilian, whose works on rhetoric were widely read in European schools in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several stages were involved in composing a speech. A number of music theorists, mostly German, applied such rhetorical ideas and terms to the composition of a piece of music. Handel’s friend Johann Mattheson discussed the following scheme in his Der vollkommene Capellmeister (1739).

First came the invention of an idea. The composer decided what kind of composition he wanted (or was obliged) to write—sacred or secular; if sacred, then Mass, oratorio, cantata, etc.; if secular, then opera, cantata, suite, sonata, concerto, etc. Whether the composition was vocal or instrumental, the composer gained inspiration from textual or imagined “words of essence.” Examples of these would be: 1. words of movement of the soul, such as “rejoicing,” “happiness,” “sadness,” and “weeping”; 2. words of movement—or implied movement—such as “walk,” “run,” “stand,” “heaven,” “earth,” “valley,” and “mountain”; and 3. words of time, number, light, and dark. The composer would then consider what musical figures were appropriate to these “words of essence” or to the affection of the piece in general.

Second came the disposition, or arrangement of the idea in the parts of the piece. This was divided into prologue, narration (statement of facts), proposition (forecast of the main points in the musical argument), confirmation (affirmative proof), refutation (presentation of contrast or opposition, so that one saw the argument from all sides), and peroration (conclusion). (The first two divisions were not always necessary.)

Third came the elaboration, in which the composer elaborated the disposition by adding “word figures” (e.g., reduplication, word play, using a word in an ultimate sense, and repetition of a word in an alternate sense) or “sentence figures” (e.g., connection, joining, repetition, suspension, question, and turning about).

Fourth came memorization. The per-
former—the composer himself if he was the performer—memorized the piece. Finally, came the performance itself, when details of interpretation were determined.6

On grounds of space we will restrict ourselves here to illustrating only the first part of this rhetorical scheme, the invention. Example 1 shows Handel’s aria “Se non giunge quel momento” from his cantata Filii adorata e cara, HWV 114 (c. 1707–08). Melodically and harmonically, this aria is extremely close to the first movement of the A minor recorder sonata, HWV 362 (Opus 1, No. 4; c. 1725–26). The text is as follows:

Se non giunge quel momento

If that moment does not arrive
When my beloved one returns to me,
I will always be weeping dejectedly.

However, my affliction keeps telling me that
Because of an evil destiny,
I shall not see you soon.

Notice that even a text as brief as this one can be full of words of essence of all three types: 1. movement of the soul: “piangero” (I will be weeping); 2. movement: “ritorni” (return); 3. time and metaphorical light and dark: “sempre” (always), “presto” (soon), “mesto” (dejectedly), “cruda” (evil). Handel sets “piangero” to long roulades and cadences. Note the harmonic boldness on “cruda.” The bass repeats the opening figures throughout the movement, and after each cadence it begins in exactly the same way, perhaps reflecting the word “sempre.” At the first occurrence of the word “ritorni,” Handel writes a figure that returns to the starting note; moreover, the opening figure in the bass leaps down an octave and then returns to the starting note in each of the first
three measures. We believe it is no coincidence that the word “return” (ritorno) also occurs in the text of a Handel aria with a similar bass, “Pur ritorno a rimirar” vi” from the opera Agrippina, HWV 6 (1708–09).

As well as demonstrating Handel’s approach to a text, this setting can teach us something about the performance of the first movement of the A minor recorder sonata. In general, we can take note of the vocal quality of the recorder melody. To appreciate this quality, transpose the aria into A minor and play it through. Now return to the recorder movement. How about playing the little cadenzas leading into each new phrase as if they were set to the word “pian-gerò”? Consider Handel’s text as you play. To aid in such an approach, in Example 2 we have set the text of the aria to the opening of the melody from the sonata movement, adding rhythmic elements from the aria where necessary. We leave it to you to complete the exercise. The text suggests that the recorder melody could often be phrased from the second beat of a given measure across to the first beat of the following measure.

Variations
Now that we have begun to understand a Baroque composer’s approach to writing a piece of music, we can look at variation, a straightforward type of Baroque composition, in which the composer was bound by the harmonic scheme, or at least the bass, of the movement or section varied. (In ornamentation, the melodic scheme should also be respected.) One or a few kinds of musical figures tended to be used systematically throughout a movement or section. The composing of variations was, in fact, a respected technique for teaching composition—one that was used, for example, by J.S. Bach with his son Carl Philipp Emanuel and other students. 9

The variation movement of Handel’s most relevant for recorder players is the gavotte from the organ concerto in G minor, HWV 291 (Opus 4, No. 3; 1735), in which the composer reuses the material of the recorder sonata in the same

Example 1. “Se non giunge quel momento” from the cantata Filli adorata e cara, HWV 114.
Example 2. The first movement of the A minor recorder sonata, HWV 362, mm. 1-9, (a) as written, (b) set to the text of, and incorporating melodic elements from, “Se non giunge quel momento.”

Example 3. The gavotte from the organ concerto in G minor, HWV 291, mm. 2-30.

Example 4. The gavotte from the organ concerto in G minor, HWV 291, mm. 2-30.
for our purposes, since he could not resist adding little bits of ornamentation here and there. Example 5 shows ornaments he added to the aria "Dolce pur d'amor l'affanno," HWV 109a and 109b, originally written c. 1710 and reworked after 1730 (the barring of the small note-values has been changed to the instrumental style of notation, to facilitate reading).

We also note in passing that, although reworking is perhaps not as helpful as reuse for learning ornamentation, since the recomposition may be much more extensive—as we have seen in our discussion of "Se non giunge quel momento"—a vocal version can shed light on a sonata movement. A further relevant example of such a reworking is the third movement of the C major recorder sonata, HWV 365 (Opus 1, No. 7; c. 1725–26), refashioned from the aria "Tears are my daily food" from the Chapel Royal anthem As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams, HWV 251d (c. 1721)—itself Handel's third and final resetting of that text, in which the descending bass line is used for the first time. The beginning of the aria is shown in Example 6. Knowing that the opening held note of the sonata movement was once set to the word "tears," can we ever play that note, or the movement, the same again?

It is also valuable to study some of the purely instrumental reworkings in Handel's sonatas themselves. We suggest, first, the early and final versions of the sixth movement of the D minor recorder sonata, HWV 367a (c. 1724).15 In his reworking, starting from a draft made dull by its manifold repetitions of one musical figure, Handel came up with several variants of that figure, combining and permuting them until he created an interesting movement.16 Start with the early version yourself and try to improve it by inventing figures different from Handel's. Second, look at the transformation of the first movement of the early D major flute sonata, HWV 378 (c. 1707–10), into that of the late D major violin sonata, HWV 371 (Opus 1, No. 13; c. 1750).17 The openings of these two movements are shown in Example 7. Notice in the mild ornamentation of the violin version that Handel filled in the wide intervals in a rhythmically interesting way, not just with a plain fast scale in even note-values, as many a modern performer would do. As an exercise, look

Example 5. Four excerpts from (a) the second version, (b) the first version of the cantata "Dolce pur d'amor l'affanno," HWV 109a and 109b, the second transposed to the key of the first.
up both movements and ornament the entire flute version (on a recorder in C if you do not play the flute) in the style of the violin version.

Part II will discuss essential graces and free ornamentation in Handel's works, then the contemporaneous examples of ornamentation that have been held up as models by modern performers.

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Notes
1 We would like to thank George Buelow for sharing the results of his Handel researches with us and Luca Pellegrini for helping us with the Italian translations.
6 See Johann Andreas Herbst, Musica Pratæa (Nürnberg, 1642) and Musica Pratæa (Nürnberg, 1643).


Example 6. "Tears are my daily food" from the anthem As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams, HWV 251d, mm. 1-13.

Example 7. The first movements of (a) the D major violin sonata, HWV 371, (b) the D major flute sonata, HWV 378, mm. 1-7.