A New Look at Handel's Recorder Sonatas

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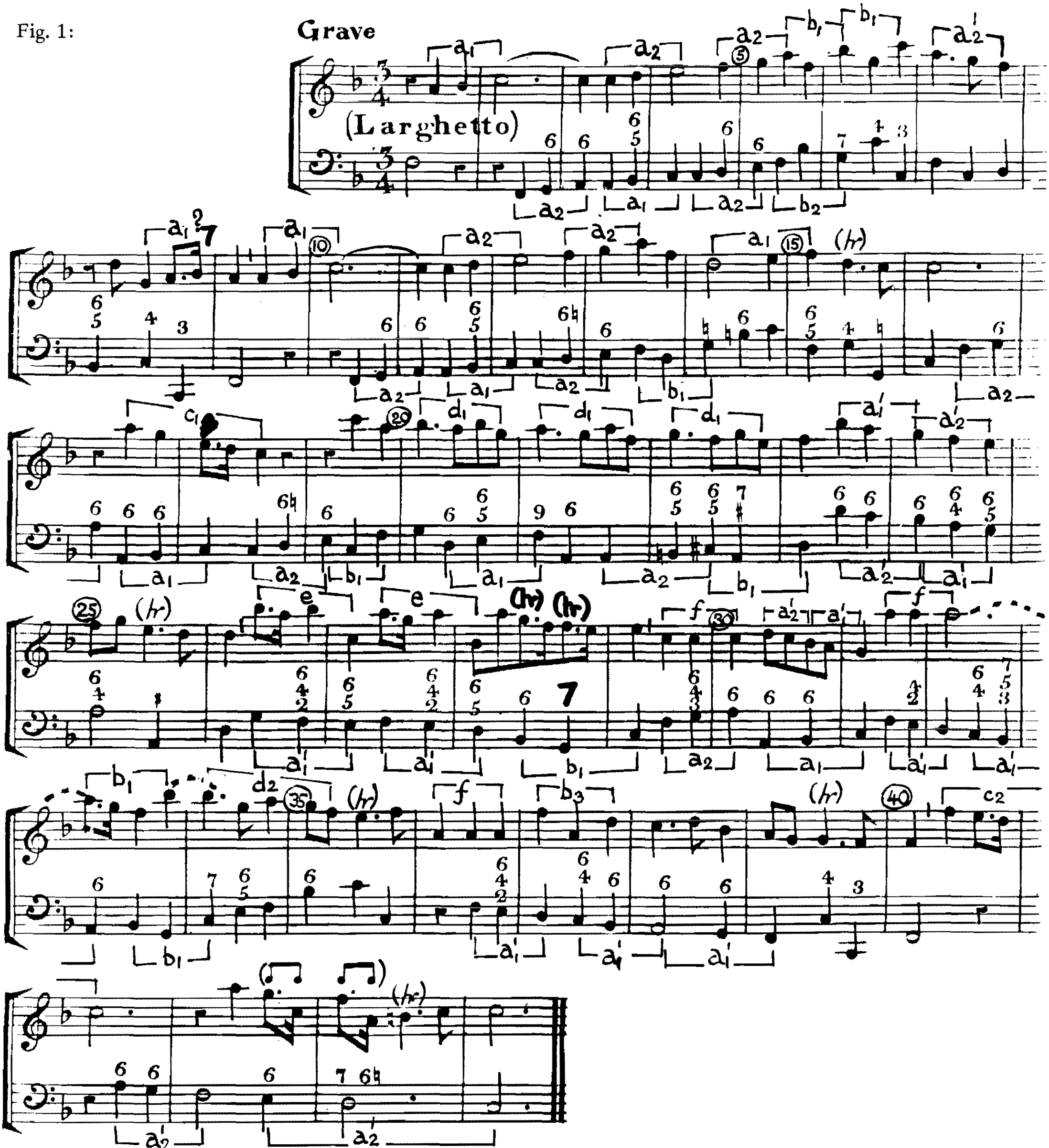
I. Ornamentation in the First Movement of the of the F major Sonata

Handel's recorder sonatas have long been staples of the repertoire. Edgar Hunt recounts how, for example, he learned to play the C major sonata as long ago as 1929, during the early days of the recorder revival.[1] Since, on the whole, they are technically fairly easy, they are accessible to almost all players, professional and amateur

Fig. 1:


Grave
(Larghetto)
a1
a2
b1
c1
d1
d2
e
f
b3
c2
(tr)
5
10
15
20
25
30
35
40

alike. They have been recorded in the entirety by performers such as Brüggen (twice), Conrad and Linde, and individually by others such as Dolmetsch, Krainis, Munrow and Scheck. They are also regularly 'borrowed' by flute players, and I have even heard them played (in the U.S.A.) by clarinettists and saxophonists. In short, they are among the best known and best loved of all recorder music.

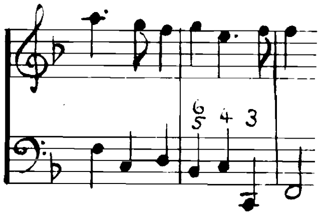
Yet familiarity breeds . . . not contempt, but lack of awareness. We tend to take them for granted. How well do we really know these sonatas, and what do we really know about how to perform them? In these two articles I want to examine two important aspects of the sonatas – ornamentation and the original Sources – that have been neglected or ill-treated to the detriment, I believe, of the music. Of course a great deal more could be said about the sonatas: I merely wish to draw renewed attention to them and to stimulate interest and discussion.

The First Movement of the F Major Sonata

This movement, with its 'noble melodic style',[2] is deceptively plain and straightforward. First of all, the manner in which most recorder players play it, with the melody line prominent and the bass line and basso continuo realisation a mere rumble in the background, destroys most of the meaning of the music. For not only is the movement an accompanied duet for melody and bass, the bass line is of great significance compositionally. Secondly, Handel unifies the movement by the melodic use of the interval of a third, rising and falling, ornamented and unornamented, in a variety of rhythms.

My melodic and motivic analysis of the movement is given in Fig. 1.[3] The basic motive is heard straight away – the rising minor third (a_1) in the melody and the rising major third (a_2) in the bass. After three statements of the motive in both melody and bass (bars 1-5) comes a new figure consisting of a falling third and a rising fourth (b_1; melody) or a rising fourth and a falling third (b_2; bass) (bars 5-6). Bar 7 in the melody has the first occurrence of the falling third, in this case the major third (a_2'). And the first phrase ends with an unusual cadential figure, which takes the place of a more conventional figure such as the one shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2:



The second phrase begins (bar 9) in exactly the same way as the first phrase. But after the three statements of the rising third motive, the bass has b_1 instead of b_2 (bars 13-14) and the melody drops by two leaps of thirds, rising again via the a_1 motive (bars 14-15). The phrase ends with a conventional cadential figure.

Next comes a short section (bars 16-19) in which the bass has the more important melodic role. While the bass has three statements of the rising third motive, the melody has a rest, followed by a new motive (c_1) based on two falling thirds, then more rests. The prominence of the bass and the rather arbitrary nature of the melody is reminiscent of the opening of the *Larghetto* movement from the C major recorder sonata (Fig. 3a; also found in a slightly different version in the G major flute sonata, Fig. 3b). Then (bars 20-23) the bass has two occurrences of each of the *a* and *b* motives, while the melody has a new sequential figure (d_1) which is really an ornamented leap of a falling third (Fig. 4, top line). To end the phrase (bars 23-24) both melody and bass have a falling fifth (two a' motives) in crotchets, which is like a compressed version of the previous three bars (Fig. 4, bottom line).

Fig. 3a

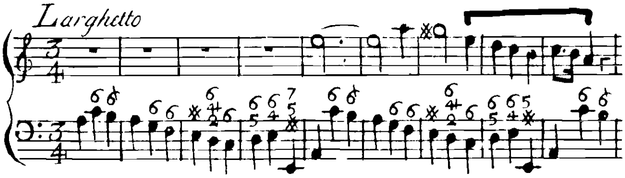
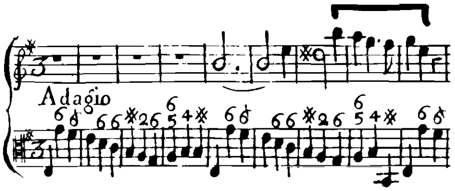
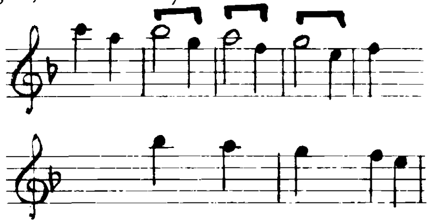


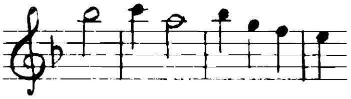
Fig. 3b





The next phrase consists of three different ideas. First (bars 26-29), the bass has two occurrences of the *a* motive and one of the *b* motive, while the melody plays what amounts to an ornamented version of Fig. 5.

Fig. 5.



Secondly (bars 29-31), the bass has two occurrences of the *a* motive while the melody introduces a new repeated-note motive (f) followed by the falling fifth. Finally (bars 31-35), the bass has two occurrences of the a' motive linked together to form a complete falling sixth for the first time, while the melody again has the f motive followed by an ornamented version of b_1 and a figure (d_2) which is like a linking of the first two occurrences of d_1.

The expected cadence on the tonic at bar 36 is interrupted by a return of the repeated-note motive (f) and what sounds like a new version of the b motive (b_3), while the bass motives reach their culmination in the linking of three a' motives to form a complete octave (bars 36-39).

Finally there is a four-bar transition to the dominant. The melody begins with a figure reminiscent of c_1 (c_2). The bass has two occurrences of the a' motive linked to form a falling sixth.

The Purpose of Ornamentation

It is now well known that many slow movements in Baroque sonatas were not performed as written but ornamented by the performer.[4] This ornamentation served several different purposes. Probably the most important purpose is described by Charles Rosen as follows:

> In Rococo interiors, the decoration was used to hide the structure, to cover the joints, to enforce a supreme continuity. . . . The musical ornamentation of the first half of the eighteenth century was an essential element in the achievement of continuity: the decoration only only covered the underlying musical structure but kept it always flowing. The High Baroque in music had a horror of the void, and the *agréments* fill what empty space there was.[5]

Presumably this achievement of continuity was something that would have been welcomed, and indeed expected, by the composer of the piece of music in question.

On the other hand, as Marc Pincherle has pointed out, 'Ornamentation expressed, better than any other element of *the art of the interpreter* [my italics], his own style, his taste, his personality'.[6] Ideally, as Quantz prescribes, the ornamentation of slow movements gives the performer 'an opportunity to demonstrate his judgement, inventiveness, and insight'.[7] In practice, as Birnbaum put it in defending J. S. Bach for writing out all his ornamentation, 'only the fewest [performers] have a sufficient knowledge [of the ornamental style]. The rest, by an inappropriate application of the manner, spoil the principal melody, and indeed often introduce such passages as might easily be attributed to an error of the composer by those who do not know the true state of affairs'.[8] Sometimes, however, a skilful performer might 'transform, by means of the ornamentation . . . a tasteless dish into a salted and seasoned viand',[9] or relieve the 'monotonous beauty' of 'the same music, always presented with the same ornaments' on repeated hearings.[10] The attraction, but also the danger, of ornamentation is that it can effect 'a reinforcement of the expressive power of a text [or melody], or a more or less radical change of orientation in its expressive quality'.[11]

That 'inappropriate application of the manner' of ornamenting was common in the eighteenth century should serve as a warning to us today when we try to ornament the music of that time. We have to examine our motives for wanting to ornament a movement. For roughly the first hundred years of the revival of interest in baroque music, from Mendelssohn's performances of Bach to the pioneering efforts of Arnold Dolmetsch, few people knew or cared that baroque music should be ornamented. Now the situation is almost the reverse: a great many performers and concert-goers, especially those associated with the recorder, know and expect that any performance of a baroque slow movement, by amateur or professional, should include ornamentation. Indeed, they would be disappointed, even scandalized, if it did not. A performer must therefore ask himself whether he is ornamenting a piece of music because the music itself requires it, or whether it is because his audience expects it.

Furthermore, although some baroque music was performed many times by the same performers for the same audiences, the vast majority of it was not intended for repeated hearing. Most of the repertoire performed by recorder players today, in fact, was not even intended for an audience at all – it was baroque *Gebrauchsmusik*, written for the amusement and entertainment of the performers themselves and perhaps a few friends. If one ornamented such music it was to please oneself only. Yet now these pieces of music are heard regularly in public concerts. 'The problem is that performance has become largely a public affair since the eighteenth century: and with the formality has come a need for variety of effect and dramatization'.[12] One public performance situation in particular was not even dreamt of by baroque composers – the gramophone or tape performance, in which exactly the same version of the music is heard over and over again.

There are no absolute answers to these thorny problems of modern musical life. Each performer must find his own solution to them. After taking great pleasure in ornamentation for its own sake for many years, I nowadays come back constantly to the cautionary words of Quantz on this subject:

> The graces should be introduced only where the simple air renders them necessary . . . . In other respects I remain of the opinion . . . [that] the more

> simply and correctly a [slow movement] is played with feeling, the more it charms the listeners, and the less it obscures or destroys the good ideas that the composer has created with care and reflection. For when you are playing it is unlikely that you will, on the spur of the moment, improve upon the inventions of a composer who may have considered his work at length.[13]

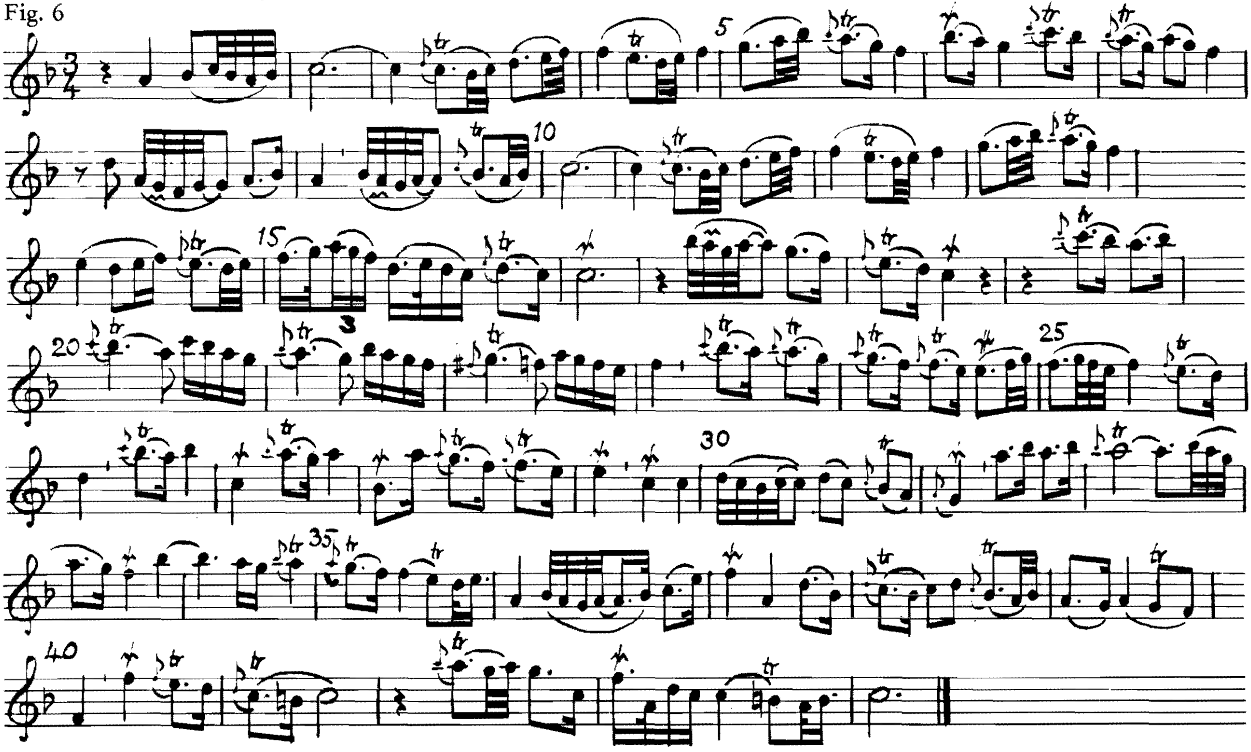
Ornamenting the Slow Movement of the Handel F Major Sonata

One of our principal sources of information on the ornamentation methods and styles of the baroque era is the surviving examples of written-out ornamentation by contemporaneous writers, composers and performers. As far as the slow movement of Handel's F major Sonata is concerned, a potentially valuable piece of information has recently come to light. David Munrow, in the sleeve notes to his record *The Amorous Flute*, wrote that this sonata is

> perhaps better known in Handel's organ concerto-version, Op. IV No. 5. For this recording we have drawn on an unusual source of contemporary ornamentation. An eighteenth-century barrel organ, now in the Colt Clavier Collection, contains a quite elaborately decorated version of the organ concerto. Although one or two ornaments are more suited to the keyboard, the majority fit the recorder admirably and have been included here since they may be taken to represent the sort of gracing which Handel *would have expected and enjoyed* [my italics] in his sonatas.[14]

Here is my transcription of this ornamented version, taken down from Munrow's record (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6

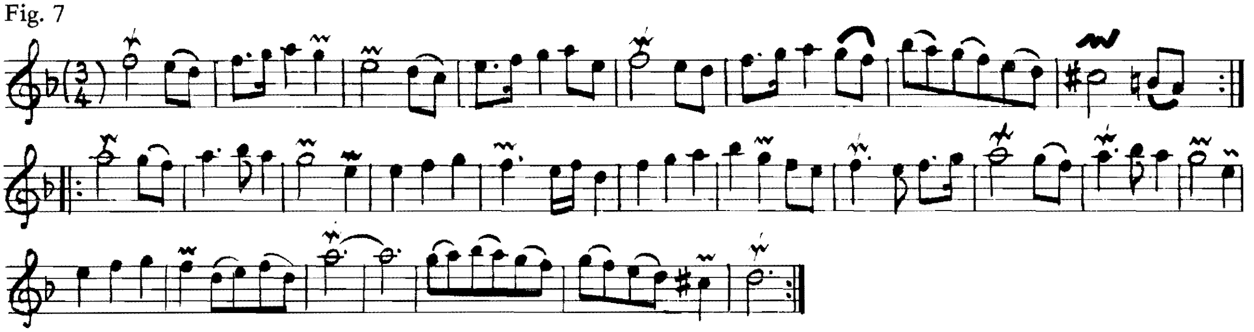


To me this ornamentation is excruciatingly and appallingly bad. To suggest, with all due respect to Munrow's memory, that Handel would have expected and enjoyed such ornamentation is dangerous nonsense. Once again, the matter is put into proper perspective by Charles Rosen:

> At once the best and worst evidence for improvised ornamentation are the written-out versions contemporary with the composer, or prepared shortly after his death. The best evidence, because they were actually performed; the worst, because they are, in most cases, abominably crude, and even when they are not, there is no reason to think the composer would have approved. Most performance is already bad enough without our being hamstrung by the habits of inferior eighteenth-century musicians and the aesthetics of the worst eighteenth-century taste.[15]

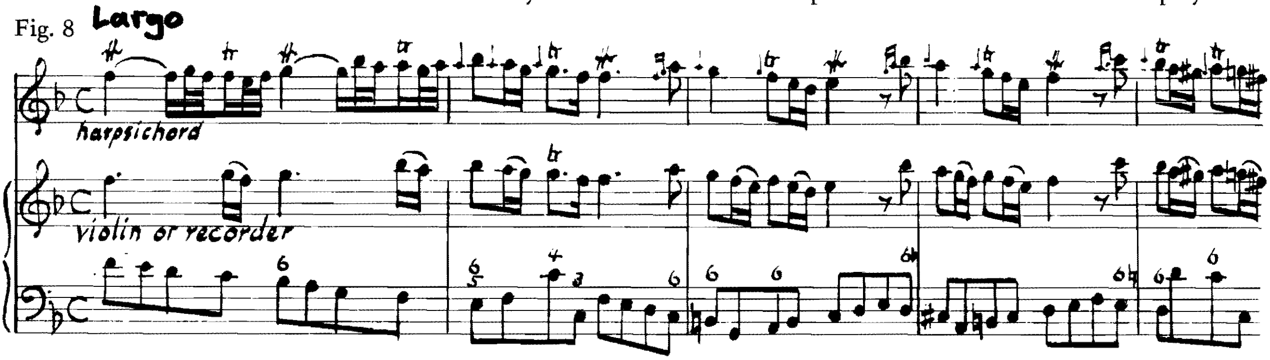
In my opinion the worst of the Munrow ornamentation's many faults is that far from helping the music to achieve continuity it actually draws attention to the notes individually and thus hinders the flow of the melody. If we examine other sources from this period, such as the ornamented melodies in the many recorder tutors published in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we do find a great many ornaments, but they are applied to French-style dance movements (for which a large number of French-style ornaments would indeed be appropriate), or else they are applied in a way which helps the continuity. A tune from *The Genteel Companion*[16] is an example of the latter (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7



Munrow's disclaimer notwithstanding, the style of ornamentation in which virtually every note is embellished with a trill, turn, mordent or passing note is typical of the *keyboard* style of the period. A very interesting document that sheds some light on the practice in England in Handel's day is a slow movement from one of the *Divertimenti da camera* by Bononcini, an Italian composer living in England, which was published in London in 1722 – the same year that Handel's recorder sonatas were first published – in two versions, one for harpsichord and one for violin or recorder.[17] The opening of the movement is given in Fig. 8. It might, of course, be argued that the composer would have expected the violinist or recorder player to improvise ornamentation similar to that of the harpsichord version. But to my mind this is unlikely; and in any event the harpsichord ornamentation is prescribed by the composer, whereas that for the violin or recorder is left to the taste of the performer. It is much more likely that the composer expected a much simpler and perhaps more melodic style of ornamentation from the violin and recorder players, if indeed he expected it to be ornamented at all.

Fig. 8

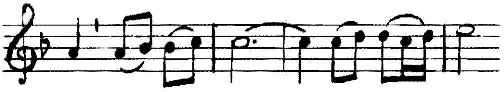


I think that the best guide to the ornamentation of the slow movement of the Handel sonata is the musical analysis given above. As Quantz said, 'The graces should be introduced only where the simple air renders them necessary'.[18] Where, then, are they necessary?

As we have seen, the opening phrase introduces the dominant *a* and *b* motives (the *a* motive both plain and inverted) and ends with an unusual ornamented cadence. Any ornamentation would destroy the exposition of these motives and obscure the meaning of the whole movement. Moreover, the first five bars of the opening phrase are repeated note for note in the second phrase. The return of a phrase in a movement is discussed by Quantz. Even speaking of a slow movement the setting of which 'is very flat, and more harmonic than melodic' and which the performer may therefore have good reason to wish to ornament, he declares that 'you must play the principal subject at the very beginning just as it is written. If it returns frequently, a few notes may be added the first time [it returns]'.[19] How much more is his good advice to be followed when the phrase is both melodic and expository.

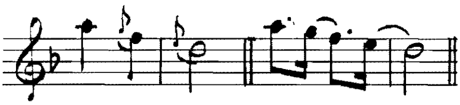
When the opening phrase returns in bar 9 I think that, as Quantz says, 'a few notes may be added', provided that they do not obscure the fact that it is the same phrase. Perhaps something that maintains the stepwise flow of the melody, such as is shown in Fig. 9. When the opening phrase changes course and moves down to a D instead of up to a Bb (bar 14), there is a great temptation for players to fill in the two intervals of a third with passing

Fig. 9

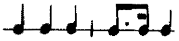
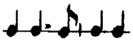


appoggiaturas, as shown in Fig. 10. I think this destroys the surprise of the D, and it is better not to ornament here at all.

Fig. 10

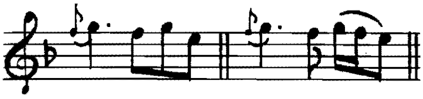


(a) Notated (b) Performed

As we saw in the analysis, the bass in bars 16-19 is prominent and the melody rather arbitrary, and Handel in a similar situation had no compunction about altering the rhythm  to 
But the melody here already has a passing note (the D in bar 18) and to my taste sounds perfectly satisfactory as it stands.

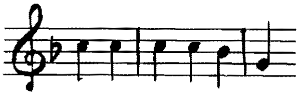
In bars 20-22 we have a sequence of three occurrences of the motive d_1. Again there is a temptation for performers to ornament not only the second and third occurrences, which might be justified on the grounds that the listener would otherwise tire of their 'monotonous beauty', but also the first occurrence, which infringes Quantz's guideline for repeated subjects. We should remember that d_1 is itself an ornamented version of the simpler falling-third idea shown in Fig. 4 (top line) and at least allow it to be stated once without further ornamentation. I like it left alone on the second occurrence also, although it can be ornamented simply the third time, perhaps with a lower appoggiatura emphasising the harmony and even a passing note, as shown in Fig. 11. The falling scale passage in bars 23-24, as we saw in the analysis, can be seen as a compressed version of the previous bars. To my mind this meaning can easily be obscured by injudicious ornamentation, and the passage might well be left alone altogether.

Fig. 11



The opening of the next phrase (bars 26-29), as we have seen, already has an ornamental character (*cf* Fig. 5), especially with the trills (of the published version) in bar 28 adding interest to the third occurrence of the dotted rhythm. Does it need further ornamentation? The repeated-note figure (f) is stated for the first time in bars 29-30. Any ornamentation here would destroy its effect when it returns in bars 31 and 36. The falling fifth in bars 31-32, simple as it is, could be seen as an ornamented version of Fig. 12.

Fig. 12.



It could also be left alone. The bass in bars 31-33, as we have seen, presents the falling third motive to form a complete sixth for the first time in the movement, which fact could easily be covered up if the melody had too much ornamentation. Many players add a trill to the held A in bar 32, which I do not find objectionable. The rhythmic interest of bars 33-34 is perhaps enough to sustain interest in itself, although it might be good to step up the drive to the cadence with ornamentation so as to increase the effect of the surprise interruption of the cadence in bar 36.

Bars 36-39 present the culmination in the bass of the third-motive on which the movement is based; again, inappropriate ornamentation here would detract from that. I think enough interest is created by the surprise interruption of the cadence, the return of the repeated-note figure (f) and the modification of the *b* motive to warrant playing the phrase as written.

Finally, the last phrase has an ornamental character. Bars 40-41 (c_2) are similar to c_1, and the ornamental dotted figure used several times previously appears (bars 42-43) with leaping intervals, which to mind adds enough interest. Recommendation again: leave alone.

To sum up, 'leave alone' could almost be the watchword for the whole movement. In very few places does the musical argument seem to me to justify any ornamentation at all, and those which do warrant ornamentation do not require very much. Let us enjoy Handel's 'noble melodic style' and leave our thirst for overdramatization to more appropriate theatres.

I should like to end this article by quoting in full the ornamentation applied to this movement by one of our greatest modern performers, Frans Brüggen, in his second recording of the sonata.[20] It does not completely follow my reasoning – the places where it departs from it are quite apparent – but on the whole I find it musical, sensitive and convincing (Fig. 13). What more can one ask?

NOTES

1. Edgar Hunt, *The Recorder and its Music*, rev. ed (London: Eulenburg, 1977), p. 134. (Old edition p. 135)
2. Anonymous sleeve note to Frans Brüggen's recording of the Handel sonatas on Telefunken, Das Alte Werk, SAWT 9421-B (ca. 1963).
3. The text given is based on the autograph manuscript. The tempo indication, trills and rhythms in parentheses are from the 18th-century printed versions. For full details see Part II of this article.
4. For further information on this subject see, for example, Betty Bang Mather & David Lasocki, *Free Ornamentation in Woodwind Music, 1700-1775* (New York: McGinnis & Marx,

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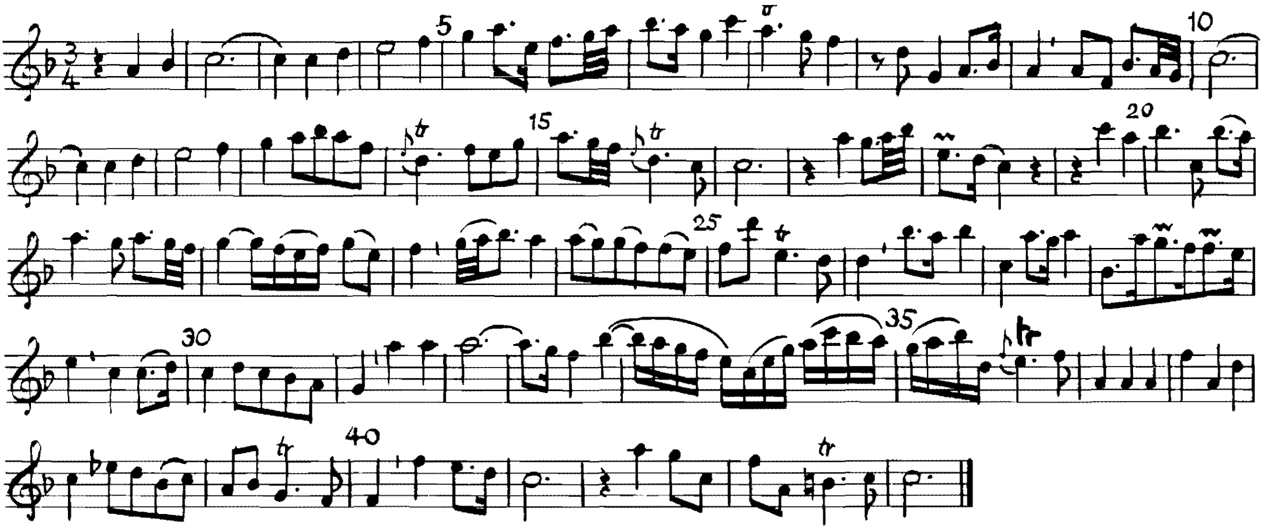
Fig. 13



On performing the Handel Recorder Sonatas, Opus One

ALAN A. SAVAGE

I bought a copy of the Handel recorder sonatas some twenty five years ago within a few weeks of acquiring my first recorder. At that time little genuine baroque recorder music was easily available and I thought it would be a good idea to start with something worthwhile; it proved to be a rather optimistic attitude. When I acquired some skill on the instrument a few years later I set about learning the sonatas and they have been faithful friends ever since. Later my wife and I started taking part in baroque concerts playing spinet and recorder respectively and we included single sonatas regularly but a hoped-for ambition was to play all four at a single concert. On many occasions we were persuaded that nobody could possibly wish to hear four recorder sonatas in one evening. However, we finally convinced ourselves that if the four sonatas were played on four different treble recorders and grouped with two of Handel's shorter keyboard suites it might make an attractive programme. Thus it came about that in July 1977 we performed the sonatas at Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire, as part of the Queen's Silver Jubilee Festival held there. Appropriately enough my copy of the sonatas was also twenty five years old.

I have spent a considerable amount of time since buying the sonatas both playing them and thinking about them. It had always concerned me that many performers managed to make all baroque sonatas sound alike and with rare exceptions this situation continued even with the advent of 'authentic' instruments and ornamentation. In fact in some ways it got worse since a strong musical personality rejoicing in its own virtuosity imposed stronger similarities than just playing the bare notes. How could this feeling be reconciled with the oft-stated baroque attitude that a movement of a sonata might be intended to create a particular mood or emotion? It seemed to me that much of the musical content was being missed in many modern performances because of the pursuit of brilliance on the part of performers or, more likely, because a modern audience expected virtuosity as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. Perhaps they are not interested in subleties of articulation, for instance, because they would be lost in a large hall. But this music was created for a more domestic scene and it should be explored under more intimate conditions. Surely the competent amateur would be best rewarded by seeking a more musical content rather than by attempting to emulate the sheer virtuosity of the professional. I do not intend to imply that a virtuoso performance is wrong; I suspect that it would have been more than popular in the baroque era, but it should be combined with a search for the appropriate mood.

When approached in the way I suggest the four Handel sonatas show a remarkable variety of expression