

Zeitschrift: Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel

Herausgeber: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

Band: 18 (1994)

Artikel: Johann Sebastian Bach and the Basso Continuo

Autor: Williams, Peter

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869094>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 24.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH AND THE BASSO CONTINUO

by PETER WILLIAMS

At first glance, this might seem a topic to have received more than enough attention during the twentieth century, from both musicologists and musicians. Not only does every Bach performance have to deal with this question in some way but certain players have made a speciality of *Bach and the Basso Continuo*. Perhaps this is something of a late twentieth-century phenomenon, for in earlier times, when practical musicians were more rigorously trained in counterpoint than they are today, the ability to realize some figured bass-lines – *correctly* as to harmony, *stylishly* as to accompaniment – was taken as something any trained musician could do.

Some years ago now the late Professor of Music at Oxford, J. A. Westrup, complained about a newspaper reviewer who had praised the continuo-player in a certain opera-performance (Handel, I think it was). His point was that it was ridiculous to praise continuo-playing: by definition it is a self-effacing art, and if you are so aware of the player's great abilities, then *ipso facto* those abilities are not so great. I sympathize with this viewpoint, understanding the pedagogic tradition that gave rise to it and (I have to admit) wishing so often in concerts to close the harpsichord lid – not so that the harpsichord is unheard but so that it does not obtrude. One needs to sense the harpsichord's harmonic fundament without its conspicuous upper partials and of course without too many ingenious or conspicuous *obbligato* flourishes added by the harpsichordist.

It is towards describing *a self-effacing art* that I would like to look at some of the questions concerning Bach continuo, examining evidence in the hope that this might lead to the next level of thought, in fact the next layer of questions. A tendency in recent decades towards an assertive musicology, one that researches and establishes facts in order to assert that such-and-such happened or that such-and-such was intended by the composer, is, I would like to think, beginning to die of natural causes now that we see how complex are any musical-historical questions. I see many statements beginning „of course, Bach expected that ...“ or „there is no doubt that Bach felt that ...“ to be a more recent version of the nineteenth century's speculative biography: such statements may often appear to be backed by evidence, but evidence is a complicated phenomenon, and it tends to get used to prove a point instead of leading gradually and subtly towards it.

When Dr. Rapp kindly sent me her invitation to join this week, I was struck by the title she proposed: *Bach and the basso continuo*. I took for granted that „Bach“ meant Johann Sebastian and not his second surviving son or his youngest son – a natural assumption in the later twentieth century, of course, but not in the London or Berlin of the later eighteenth. My first thought was: why in English does it sound scholastic, even scientific, to include „the“ in this title

Bach and the basso continuo, rather than *Bach and basso continuo*. Well, even in these days of deconstruction I was not able to squeeze much significance out of this! – but my second thought seemed more interesting: did Bach himself ever use the phrase *basso continuo* or, for that matter, *il basso continuo*? Either way, what would this signify?

It might be that these two questions lead nowhere very conclusive, but they do have the benefit of taking one immediately into the crucial region of source-study. After all, with a question about what is the authentic terminology, one is trying to begin at square one, whether its significance turns out to be great or small. As a matter of fact, only with the new *Bach Compendium* is it at all easy to check on such little details as this, and you often have to search carefully to establish quite simple facts. When the *Compendium* volumes are complete, one will probably find that in neither scores nor parts did Bach say *basso continuo* but something else: in early cantatas, *basso per l'organo* or *coll'organo*; in the case of the Violin solos, *senza basso accompagnato*; in most other cases, simply *continuo*. The last includes ensemble works like the *Brandenburg Concertos*, Italianate sonatas like the *Musical Offering*, and mature choral works such as the Leipzig cantatas – that is to say, both works for harpsichord continuo and for organ continuo.

Now obviously, continuo is an adjective to the missing word *basso*, but I have wondered whether, in using a succinct up-to-date Italian term, Bach had a more up-to-date Italian idea of figured-bass realization than he did as a younger church composer, before he was familiar with Italian concertos or operas or even very much chamber music. (By the way, early Italian church musicians too labelled their parts *basso* or *per l'organo*, so the issue here is not what is Italian but what is up to date.) Wittingly or unwittingly, when we create the phrase *Bach and the basso continuo*, we are speaking with far more knowledge of different types of continuo than Bach himself ever had. For us, *basso continuo* is a phrase important in an uncontrollably vast amount of music, from at least Caccini's *Nuove musiche* to at least Bruckner's *Requiem*, and we use the phrase as a kind of neutral, textbook concept. Since every composer employed basso continuo, we adopt different styles across a spectrum of music broader than any known to the original musicians. But unfortunately the intimate knowledge *they* had of their narrow band of music made them totally familiar with the conventional manner of playing it, whatever that convention was, and we are obviously less familiar.

In the case of J.S. Bach, continuo-playing has something else in common with other topics: our evidence about details of his playing, frequently made use of by writers and players today, concerns the composer only in his maturity, even his old age. This is so even though the original writers do not make it clear – Philipp Emanuel, for instance, can not have known much about his father's playing of anything, with or without the thumb, before his father was about 40 years old. In the second place, written evidence necessarily says as much about the writer as his topic, and we *have* to ask why or how a theorist

comes to say anything about any topic. That is a complex question. And thirdly, it is not always clear at what level a writer is writing. Although Mattheson recommended continuo-players to play a lot of solo music in order to learn a sense of melody, it by no means follows from this that he is expecting the player to invent new colourful melodies in the right hand: he may be speaking merely of learning to use the right hand in a musical way, something we today would take as obvious. In his day, one could have learnt figured bass before solo music, but I assume that this is inconceivable today.

Similarly, when Forkel points out that Bach's technique for harmonizing chorales is to distribute the four parts equally between the hands – thus not playing the chords entirely in the right hand above single bass-notes – he can have had no idea whatever how Bach had actually accompanied chorales when he was a young organist in Arnstadt or Weimar. Besides, although Forkel is most familiar to us as the author of the first complete Bach biography, he wrote other successful volumes on musical pedagogy and therefore had his own ideas on what was a good way to harmonize. So, to use fashionable terms, he had his own *agenda* which cries out to be *contextualized*, in the manner alas more familiar to today's students of comparative literature than of music. Fifty years after Bach died, Forkel looked back to find his music a model for all that was or had been good – that is to say, something very different from the modern and startling symphonies being composed at that very time, over there in Vienna. Perhaps Forkel even made use of Bach specifically to justify his own conservatism.

Now I have my own reasons for thinking that there is something in this – and therefore that Forkel is no reliable witness to Bach's continuo playing or anything else – because of being brought up within a pedagogical tradition not so different from Forkel's. I too have assumed in the past, for example, that equal distribution of the notes between the two hands is musically superior to playing the chords entirely in the right hand. Perhaps it is, considered as a way of creating four-part harmony in one's general musical studies. But the whole background to continuo-playing known to German organists in the early eighteenth century suggests that this is not how most of them realized their *Generalbaß* – hence perhaps Heinichen's demonstration of such shared chords, made for the benefit of such players, in his book of 1728? It is much more likely that unless playing in the very full manner, the left hand played only the bass. Similarly, the idea that the right hand should not duplicate or cross or appear to interfere with the soloist was something that music-students of my generation learnt in harmony classes; but various kinds of evidence suggest that by the early eighteenth century, especially for less formal music, the German, Italian, English or French continuo-player had no qualms about this at all. On the contrary.

The problem, I think, is not so much that Forkel or any of us has to form views about Bach's practices too long after the event to get at the truth, but that we do not always recognize what our own assumptions are. Especially in

practical matters such as continuo-playing, we want quick answers and don't see that the questions we ask are already based on assumptions. Hence the tendency to take written evidence uncritically.¹

Let me give some examples. Virtually all the first-hand observations of Bach's continuo-playing that have come down to us describe his fanciful realizations, and one still sees them quoted to justify such playing today. Here are the earliest and the latest:

Lorenz Mizler in 1738:

[Capellmeister Bach accompagnirt] einen ieden General-Baß zu einem Solo so ..., daß man denket, es sey ein Concert, und wäre die Melodey so er mit der rechten Hand machet, schon vorhero also gesetzt worden ... ich [habe] es selbsten gehöret.

(Bach ... plays every thorough bass accompaniment to a solo in such a way that one thinks it is a concerto, and that the melody he makes in the right hand had already been pre-composed ... I have heard this myself.)

Johann Christian Kittel in 1808:

... man [durfte] sich da mit einer magern Generalbaßbegleitung ohnehin nicht vor wagen ... Demohnerachtet mußte man sich immer darauf gefaßt halten, daß sich oft plötzlich Bachs Hände und Finger unter die Hände und Finger des Spielers mischten und ... das Accompagnement mit Massen von Harmonien ausstaffirten

([In front of Bach] one did not dare to come forward with a thin thorough-bass accompaniment. Whatever the case, one needed always to be prepared to have Bach's hands and fingers often mingling suddenly with the hands and fingers of the player [of continuo] and ... garnishing the accompaniment with masses of harmonies.)

Now Mizler and Kittel appear to be describing things they personally witnessed – in fact, they draw attention to this, which itself is interesting, I think, and makes one wonder what Professor Westrup would have thought of the picture they painted. And because these authors claim to be eye-witnesses, one begins by trusting them to be telling the truth. But can one equally assume that they are speaking of Bach playing his own music, or that they would even see this to be an interesting question, as it would be to us? Kittel was remarking on the performance of cantatas in church („eine Kirchenmusik“), but since he was only eighteen years old when Bach died, he must have had only the composer's last year or two in mind, when cantatas were revived less regularly

¹ *Author's postscript.* In the Basel continuo conference of March 1993, I felt that lectures examining e.g. the references to violoncello continuo in German sources of the eighteenth century, or demonstrations of continuo „realizations“, failed to examine a key question. This is not, What do these references tell us and what do they leave unsaid, but, Why do they say anything at all?

than before and who knows with what changes in the manner of performance? Was a Bach cantata performance in 1749 really identical to the first performance of the same work a quarter of a century earlier? In the case of Mizler, the music he was speaking about is also quite uncertain: he could well have been speaking of second-rate chamber music, with its thin textures and tired counterpoint.

Now I know that it looks as if Mizler's report is corroborated later when Philipp Emanuel, in describing his father's techniques to Forkel, spoke specifically with respect to music by *other* composers. J. S. Bach, he said, „... hat ... mehr als einmahl Trios accompagnirt, und, weil er aufgeräumt war, u. wuste, daß der Componist dieser Trios es nicht übel nehmen würde, aus dem Stegereif u. aus einer elend beziferten ihm vorgelegten Baßstimme ein vollkommenes Quatuor daraus gemacht, worüber der Componist dieser Trios erstaunte.“

(„... accompanied trios [that is, played basso continuo to two soloists] on more than one occasion and, because he was in a good humour and knew that the composer of the trio would not be offended, he made out of it a complete quartet extempore on the basis of a sparsely figured continuo part set before him, over which the composer of the trio was astounded“.)

As well he might be, if his music was in the simple up-to-date Italian *galant* style of the 1740s! But here the question is, can we take at face-value what Philipp Emanuel says? How do we know he is not merely glossing the remarks published thirty-six years earlier by Mizler? One little detail in these remarks *is* rather curious: Philipp Emanuel says that his father played trios „on more than one occasion“ („mehr als einmahl“). Now why would he say that? Is he implying that in fact Sebastian did not play chamber music very often and that when he did, he could not help improving on the feeble efforts of his contemporaries? Was Emanuel really intimately acquainted with his father's habits, and if so, over what periods?

My point would be that although he probably was, Emanuel might be writing such things (and doing so for publication) only because Mizler had already written something similar. Thus Evidence B exists because Evidence A exists, and there is no real corroboration. One possibility is that since on this occasion Emanuel was giving Forkel examples of his father's grasp of harmony („vermöge seiner Grösse in der Harmonie“), he is implying that the added counterpoint was new on each occasion, therefore that his father could be constantly inventive and never repeat himself. If so, then perhaps counterpoints added by the continuo-player were unusual. It would certainly have been important in a biography, or notes towards a biography, to make clear that its hero-subject was infinitely inventive. In addition, much of what Philipp Emanuel says about his father is also aimed at showing him to have been „something of a character“, as we might say: this was another motif of the then new genre of *heroic biography*.

Also rather close to Mizler's remarks were those made by Johann Friedrich Daube in 1756, for like Forkel, Daube was making use of Bach for ideas he was developing in a book on harmony-instruction. Meanwhile, and shortly before Daube was writing, Johann Sebastian had died and his *Obituary* had been published. Now this is a document rich in up-to-date literary agendas, in particular those belonging to the Enlightenment genre of heroic biography, with its aim of praising its subject according to certain criteria. For example, the subject of a biography had to have been a gifted child and one preferably thwarted, and he had to have vanquished all rivals, just as he had vanquished early parental resistance. Clearly, one way for a composer to vanquish a rival was to add another part to his feeble trio sonata, so the story of new counterpoints introduced by the continuo-player does at least – to say no more – fit in with contemporary views on the irrepressible *Will of the Genius*.

Of course, I am not asserting that J. S. Bach never added new counterpoints in the right hand. The point is that even if he did, what I have said about these eye-witness reports would still remain true and fair. One might better ask, How can we begin to know whether he did add counterpoints or not? Furthermore, since at best these reports relate to the last dozen or so years of the composer's life, do they tell one very much about when most of his music was composed? Well, they are better than nothing, and it would be a pity to demolish what little evidence we seem to have. But we need to define the terms of reference. Daube does refer to imitation in the right or left hand – that is, realizing a continuo bass with bits of motivic imitation that have the effect of encouraging the soloist. But knowing neither the context of which Daube speaks nor whether his testimony is authentic in any way, we should surely not build too much on it. It is not even clear whether he is speaking of instrumental or vocal music. Being able to improvise good counter-melodies is a criterion now of good musicianship, and our enthusiasm for it as a musical skill can give a false impression of how performances actually were in the past.

To take a particular example: let us consider a pair of treatments for the same aria, a difficult, unfigured movement in Cantata 3, *Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid*. (By the way, even the new *Bach Compendium* does not say whether, in any given set of parts, the continuo is figured or not; but this could be important information for the scholar, and I have recommended to the editors that they include it.) In Music Example 1 (a) you will see what might be called a standard German organist's continuo; this was made, no-one knows for what reason, by a former chorister of St. Thomas, Leipzig, the organist Christian Friedrich Penzel.

Ex. 1a:

6 6 6 6 5 6 6 6 6 4 5 6 7
4+ 5b 4 4 2 6 4+ 5b b 2 2 7
2 2

6 6 6 6 7 4 # 6 6 6 6 7 6 5 6 [6]
5 4+ 5 5 6 3 4+ b3 4 4+ [4]
2 2 3

6 6 7b 4 3 [6] 6 6 6 [7b] 6 [7b] [6]
5b 4+ 4 2 4+ 4+ 4+ 4+ 5 [5] [5]
2+ 2 2 2 2 2

Version by C. F. Penzel (1737–1801), incomplete; ms lost. See Y. Kobayashi, *Franz Hauser und seine Bach-Handschriftensammlung*, Göttingen 1973, p. 183 and *Bach Compendium I*, p. 160.

Like the Leipzig organ-assistants during Bach's time, Penzel added figures to the part, though here they break off after fifteen bars; he also interpreted the harmony as right-hand chords, mostly on the beat. It is possible that Penzel was trying not to make a complete organ-part but simply to write out the difficult harmony implied by this awkward bass-line. The result is something

that might seem to us neither very organ-like nor very musical: one could imagine continuing in this vein today only if one were deliberately setting out to create a performance that imitated most run-of-the-mill performances in the middle of the eighteenth century. Of course, this could be a perfectly worthwhile aim, and each of us surely knows that as we play today in contexts that are technologically quite anachronistic – for example, the context of edited recordings for commercial sale – we are compelled to go for standards of polished performance mostly unknown in the eighteenth century. Polish is a historic phenomenon of its own.

Ex. 1b

Emp-find' ich Höl-len-angst und Pein,—

p

Version by D. F. Tovey, pencil notes in his personal copy of *Bach-Gesamtausgabe* 1 (University of Edinburgh, Faculty of Music Library)

I don't know when it was that Donald Francis Tovey made his little counterpoint to this aria – about 1900, I would guess, on the very threshold of the Performance Practice movement. Now Tovey was incapable of doing anything unmusical, but what interests me in particular about this version is that it belongs to the same cultural context – it has the same musical-pedagogical priorities – as the polished performance required for today's recordings. For insofar as it gives a nicely prepared and thought-out version of a difficult aria, this contrapuntal melody – most people would agree that it is really rather Bach-like – expresses on paper the same attitude to performance that is assumed by today's record-market. They are both seeking ways to realize this music, not in its localized, liturgical setting but in an abstractly ideal way for musically educated listeners long after the event, and have little sense of its liturgical weight.

There is another point: Tovey's version is giving particular meaning to the word *interpretation*. „To interpret“ has come to mean to give a thought-out, more or less strongly characterized, practical demonstration of what it is one thinks was ideally intended by the composer. But expressed like that, you can see that interpretation can be a vain thing: *vain* in the sense that one is presuming to have grasped what someone of Bach's gifts was intending, and *vain* in the sense that in any case it cannot really be brought off authentically, since there was no „ideal performance“ in his mind. I rather think that if we were to meet Bach and ask him „how did you interpret the continuo part to this aria“ he would not understand the word „interpret“, which would have had for him a deeper, more theological meaning. We would have to re-frame the question: „How did your organist Christian Gräbner play this aria in 1726 when you first performed the cantata? Did he use the unfigured part made by the copyist Andreas Kuhnau or did he write out chords like Christian Penzel? Did he really master the harmony?“ Put like this, the question seems to me to point more towards Music Example 1a than towards Tovey's 1b.

Let us turn to another point of importance to the continuo-player: how full the accompaniment should be. In the remarks quoted earlier, Kittel is speaking not of interesting new counterpoints as such but of rich or full harmonies: „One did not dare to come forward with a thin thorough-bass accompaniment ... one needed always to be prepared to have Bach's hands and fingers often mingling suddenly with the hands and fingers of the player [of continuo] and ... garnishing the accompaniment with masses of harmonies“.

Though an interesting piece of evidence, providing one tries to contextualize it in the manner I have already suggested, one can not say from this *how* rich are the harmonies Kittel is talking about. The chords of the seventh and ninth in the mature Bach idiom do often require realization in five or six parts, and the young Kittel would not have found this easy. Judging by his own music, his understanding of harmony was not, shall we say, very sophisticated. He may therefore have been speaking merely of the need there was to realize Bach's harmonies more fully than, say, Telemann's, which one can quite believe, and his words are not necessarily any evidence for the big eight or ten-part chords such as were illustrated by certain Italian theorists. However, one might certainly conjecture that in the more massive choral works, pupils or organ-assistants were expected to fill out the *tutti* harmonies to the best of their abilities, as they were for the seventeenth-century Italian repertoire. Even the beginner must have been encouraged to distinguish between a solo aria and, say, a big *Gloria* or *Sanctus* for two choirs. One could imagine something like this for the *B minor Mass* on which Bach was working when Kittel would have known him. Perhaps he even put the Mass into rehearsal while Kittel was present?

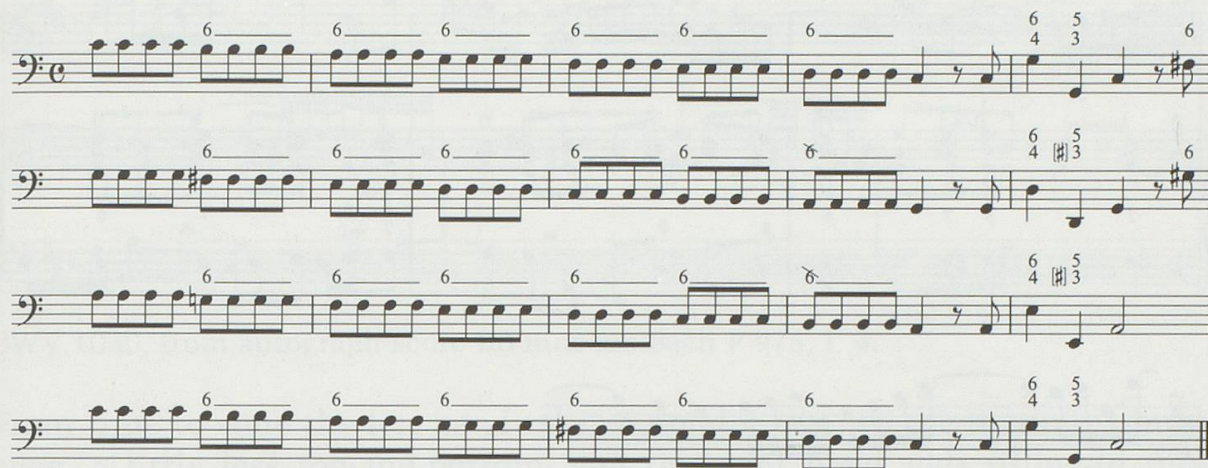
I realize that if one begins to doubt whether those close to Bach do authorize either very full accompaniment or improvised counter-melodies, then all one seems to have left is plain four-part harmonies in the right hand; nothing

much in the way of tied notes and articulate phraseology; and all music – cantatas, sonatas, arias, concertos – sounding much the same. Writers do not even make so very much of the distinction between harpsichord and organ, giving only such generalities as „don't use arpeggios much on the organ“. And even this advice about not playing arpeggios needs some thought: any player knows that an occasional spread chord can be very effective on the right kind of organ, and one needs to know what „arpeggio“ means – as Frescobaldi used the word, or Johann David Heinichen, or who? When Heinichen says „Accompany recitative on the organ without arpeggios“, he seems to mean not so much *without an occasional gentle spread upwards* but *without chords broken up in regular and distinct patterns*, many forms of which would indeed be strange on an organ.

But to return to the plain four-part harmonies: there is good evidence that these played a major part in all musical study. Four-part harmony was something learnt at various stages of training. Thus the student following advice in the *Clavier-Büchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach* of 1725 on how to realize figures would learn an ideal harmony, whether it was written on paper or played on the keyboard. Philipp Emanuel told Forkel that his father taught harmony and part-writing this way rather than through the abstract rules in Fux's *species* counterpoint. Of course, Emanuel would – would he not? – tell Forkel that his father taught more in the manner of protestant German organists than of catholic maestros like Fux; for all we know to the contrary, Emanuel may have been consciously ignoring Mizler's translation of Fux, published in Leipzig at about the same time as the *Goldberg Variations*. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine that at least earlier in his life, Sebastian had taught harmony in a practical way, i.e. by means of figured bass. The lessons he gave Johann Tobias Krebs, for example, probably included this kind of exercise. But teaching the reverse is also valuable, as any teacher still knows: one learns to make good keyboard realizations in direct proportion to one's knowledge already of harmony and voice-leading.

After the *Clavier-Büchlein*, a similar approach is developed in the so-called *Precepts and Principles for Playing a Thorough Bass in four Parts* (*Vorschriften und Grundsätze zum vierstimmigen Spielen des Generalbaßes*), a little treatise dated 1738 and attributed to Bach himself by one Carl August Thieme, a pupil of the St. Thomas School in Leipzig. Rather like a medieval theorist's treatise on organum, this MS is a compilation drawing on three or more older sources, including Friedrich Erhardt Niedt's *Musicalische Handleitung* Part 1. Whoever did the compiling, and whether or not J. S. Bach did authorize its many interesting details, it is certainly a valuable indication of how in 1740 or so young musicians in Leipzig taught themselves. By including sample bass-lines, the treatise shows that to play continuo was itself part of learning music, for these basses sound like the simple up-to-date cello lines of many a galant chamber sonata:

Ex. 2:



Opening example from 1738 Treatise (see List of References, under C. A. Thieme)

It is to be hoped that a forthcoming edition of the 1738 treatise by Pamela Poulin for Oxford University Press will deal not only with questions of authenticity but of origin. Why, for example, did the treatise begin with Niedt, rather than with older material (like Werckmeister) or newer (like Heinichen)? Had recent publication of continuo tutors made teachers wish to teach by means of exercises rather than, as one imagines to have been the case in the seventeenth century, trial and error in real music? Similar questions could also be asked about the so-called partimenti BWV 907 and 908, semi-realized basses that probably belong to much the same pedagogical tradition in central Germany.

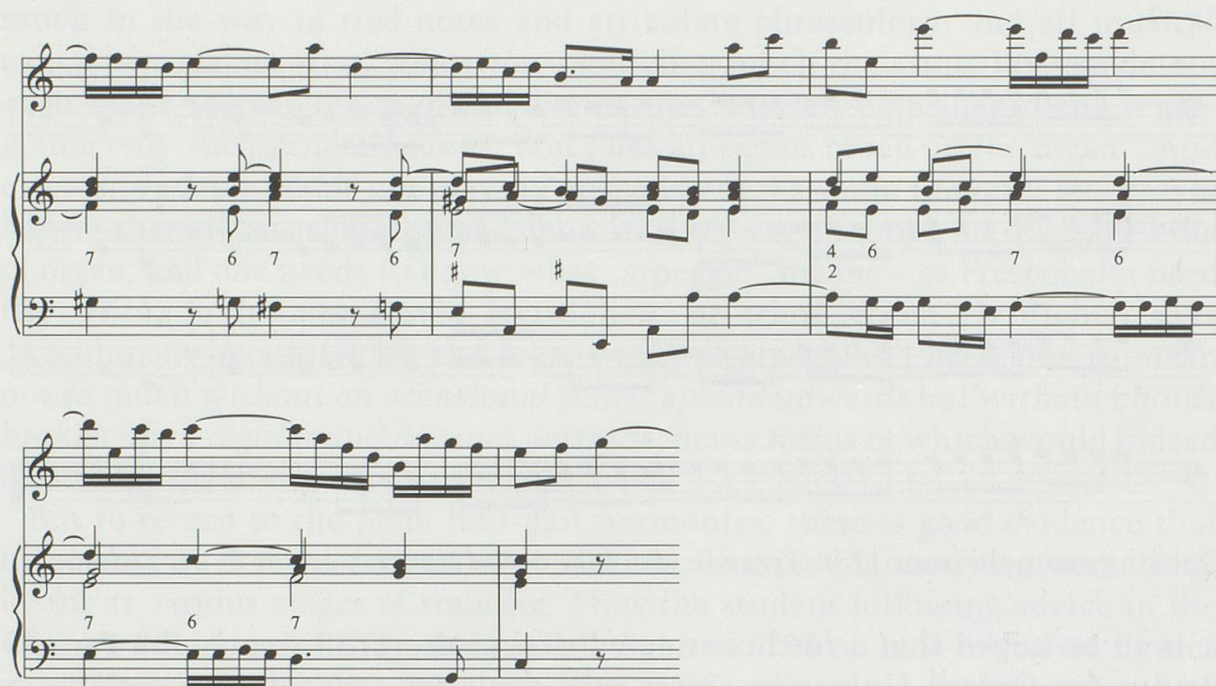
Good four-part harmony can be seen again in the work of an earlier Bach pupil, Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber, whose written-out version of the figured bass part to a sonata from Albinoni's *Opus 6* was, according to Gerber himself, „durchcorrigirt von Sebastian Bach“. His son later praised this kind realization (see *NBA IX/2*, p. 99). The copy of c1724/5 (*NBA IX/2*, Abb. 82) does not contain the violin part and in this respect suggests that Bach worked from the bass part only, asking pupils to write out harmonic realizations as an exercise:

Ex. 3:

Grave Adagio

Violino

Cembalo



H. N. Gerber, realization of Sonata No. 6 from T. Albinoni, *Trattenimenti armonici per camera*, Op. VI (Amsterdam, c. 1712).

Here too are the same three-part chords in the right hand, but at least a few ties between the upper parts are beginning to suggest an articulated part-writing. As players know, chords can be shaped or phrased in such a way as to be rather melodious, and this Albinoni realization does have some felicitous touches. It also represents up-to-date interests: although published ten or more years or earlier, an Albinoni sonata was typically fashionable, as much so in its way as Vivaldi's concertos Opus III/VIII had been for J. S. Bach back in Weimar.

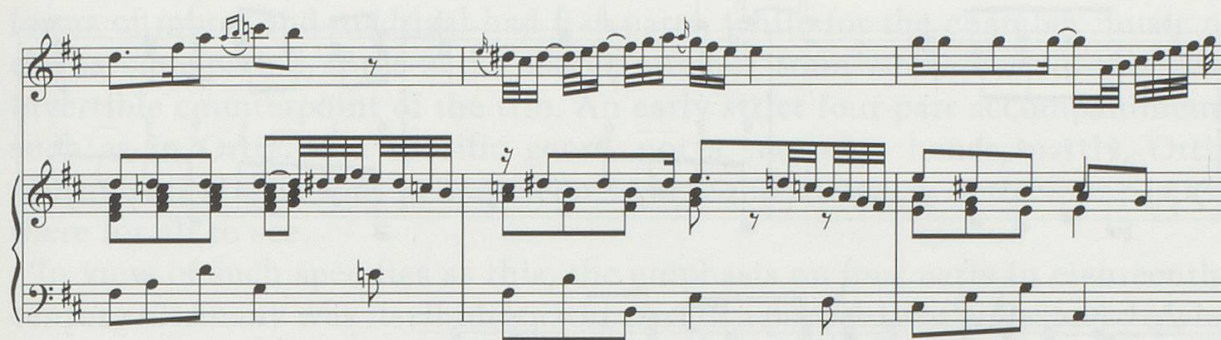
Nevertheless, in comparison with the Gerber realization, Bach's own written-out accompaniment for the Largo of the Flute Sonata in B minor BWV 1030 a few years later does represent a considerably further step:

Ex. 4:

Largo e dolce

Flute

Harpichord

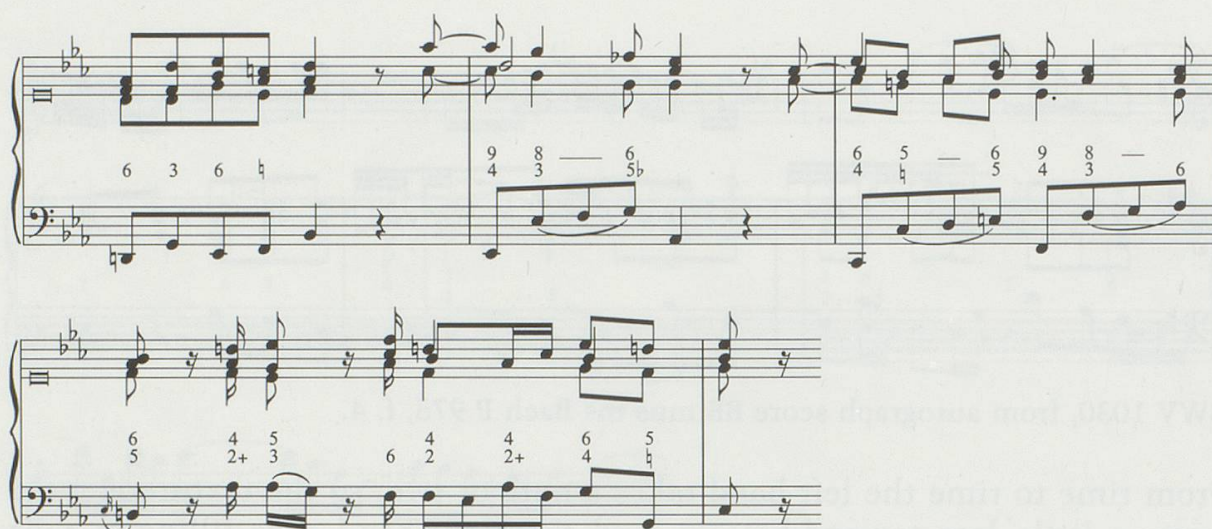


BWV 1030, from autograph score BB mus ms Bach P 975, f. 4.

From time to time the left hand takes a note or two, so the texture is more even, a little less top-and-bottom; and the right hand adds filling-in runs between the soloist's phrases. These little right-hand runs, which could become irritating with a lesser composer, remind me of the organ's flourishes between the lines of a chorale sung by a congregation, a type of performance with which any German organist in 1730 would have been familiar. Although most organ interludes may have been disruptive and boorish compared to those in the suave Flute Sonata, one might think that part of the art here had been to assimilate an old accompanimental device into the highly polished manner of an elegant and modern chamber sonata.

My final example of a four-part realization – Johann Philipp Kirnberger's version of the Sonata in the *Musical Offering* – gives the player a literal interpretation of the complex harmony that supports the flute and violin soloists above. I would not recommend harpsichordists to play from it, despite being encouraged to do so by the current Peters edition of the *Musical Offering*, where all the movements are edited according to these realizations by Kirnberger, or by musicians in his circle. In the faster movements, this four-part treatment is particularly pedantic and becomes almost unplayable, but even the slow movements are to be seen as contributions to „Generalbaß“ study rather than to basso continuo accompaniment:

Ex. 5:



J. P. Kirnberger, realization of *Andante* from the Sonata in *Musicalisches Opfer*, BWV 1079 (see List of References, under J. P. Kirnberger).

Notice that for performance itself – for music played by an ensemble – the very second chord is unnecessary: the flat 7th doubles what the soloists are playing and in the process becomes at best unnecessary, at worst a quite unacceptable intrusion. Kirnberger puts in the flat 7th because he has a rule that discords like 7ths should always be prepared.

There are at least two purposes behind this so-called realization. Kirnberger is writing out the figured harmony of a difficult piece, and as such is offering an „Exemplum“ for „Generalbaß“ or „Harmonielehre“; but he is also using it to prove an idea of his own, namely that whatever his contemporaries might say, trios need harmony in four parts. In effect, although he does not say so, he is making a critique of contemporary trios in „Galantem Stil“ and showing that such chords as sevenths, normally a 7/3 in Fux or Palestrina, really need four parts now that one writes them as 7/5/3. Unfortunately, Kirnberger succeeds only in presenting something without variety, something with neither a sense of effective harpsichord tessitura nor the lightness of touch known to continuo-players on the period's fortepianos. You would never know from a German harmonist of the Kirnberger kind that – to take one example – a very effective way of accompanying a cadence is to play nothing at all above the bass line, whatever the figures. There seems to me no more reason to play Kirnberger's „realization“ of the *Musical Offering* than to accompany the B minor Fugue from *WTC1* with the same kind of four-part figured harmony that he began to supply it with in another of his books (Kirnberger 1773: 55–6).

Despite such remarks as these, however, I think we should hesitate to discard the literal four-part realization merely on principle. The emphasis on four-part harmony has itself interesting historical roots, and although it would take the present discussion too far to trace this history, there are various things one could point out about it. In the first place, four parts are by no means an obvious texture in either modal or diatonic harmony: the classic

forms of motet and madrigal had five parts, while for the chamber music of the baroque period, three is the classic number, from which derives the ideal invertible counterpoint of the trio. An early strict four-part accompaniment, such as in Ortiz, is a specific genre, not a „norm“ – hence, partly, Ortiz printing his realizations in open score, where the strictness of the four parts is there for all to see.

In view of such specifics as this, the emphasis on four parts in eighteenth-century Germany was itself idiomatic, part of a particular if widespread style, something by no means as neutral as it now seems. And, by the way, it must have had some influence on the emergence of the Classical period's invention, the string quartet, explaining perhaps why this medium was such a German-Austrian speciality. (The Italians, the English and the French gave far less of an emphasis to four parts.) Consequently, players today would be appropriately distinguishing between well-established musical styles if they accompanied, say, a Purcell song or a Handel aria predominantly in three parts, but a Bach cantata aria or a Bach continuo sonata in predominantly four.

There is some evidence in Germany that players were sometimes encouraged to work towards a more „künstlerisches“ accompaniment than can easily be produced from a merely „schulmeisterliche“ harmonization in four parts. Of course, when in putting it in these terms, I am expressing the post-Enlightenment assumption that the „Künstler“ is somehow superior to the „Schulmeister“. But in 1700 it is doubtful if anyone would have thought that accompaniment was anything but a job of work, straightforward, a craft requiring not conspicuous artistry but a solid, workmanlike understanding of harmony. When books do begin to include hints that seem to authorize a more imaginative continuo, they probably represented a major shift in the concept of the artist-performer. I am thinking in particular of the books by Johann David Heinichen, and I can quite see why he is popular today in discussions of performance practice. Again, however, one needs to contextualize. The titlepage to Heinichen's book of 1711 says the following:

„Neu erfundene und gründliche Anweisung, wie ein Musik-Liebender auf gewisse vortheilhaftige Arth könne zu vollkommener Erlernung des General-Basses, entweder durch eigenen Fleiß selbst gelangen, oder durch andere kurz und glücklich dahin angeführet werden, dergestalt, daß er so wohl die Kirchen als Theatralischen Sachen, insonderheit auch das Accompagnement des Recitativs-Styli wohl verstehen und geschickt zu tractiren wiße.“

(Newly thought-out and basic Method how a music-lover can profitably attain a complete learning of Thorough Bass either through his own industry or be brought to it by someone else, in such a manner that he will understand, and be able to play knowledgably, church things as well as theatrical, especially the accompaniment of the recitative-style.)

Heinichen's books were published in Hamburg and Dresden, two cities with a more cosmopolitan music-culture than anything known on a regular basis by J. S. Bach. I wonder if in Weimar or Leipzig in c1710 there really were

amateur musicians anxious to learn how to accompany recitative. Is that very likely? One significance of Heinichen's reference to recitative *styles* and to theatre music (primarily meaning opera) is not so much that he was writing for players of both sacred and secular music as that he was now actually saying so. This is interesting, for recent German books, such as the one by Johann Philipp Treiber, had focused more on organists and their need to accompany in church. Notice where it was that Treiber published his book, and how his titlepage makes a point of saying that he is not using secular examples but, instead, a pair of chorales.

So Heinichen was making important attempts to write for the most up-to-date interests, and for their regular Sunday church-duties few if any German organists in 1711 would have required much advice on how to accompany free recitative. And even when Bach did begin to develop his recitative around 1714 – this was for biblical texts, something very different from secular cantatas – nothing that Heinichen had said would have seemed very relevant, I think, unless one can make out a case that the Weimar cantatas were noticeably operatic in their *manner* of performance. It is certainly imaginable that most of the earliest German organists needing to learn about accompanying *recitativo secco* were those directing music in the galleries of the more important „Hofkirchen“ and „Schloßkapellen“. But the time would surely come when any talented musician played many kinds of imported music and showed enthusiasm for learning to do interesting things in his continuo-playing. Since Venetian *concertos* soon became popular and formative, why should not Venetian continuo-practices also?

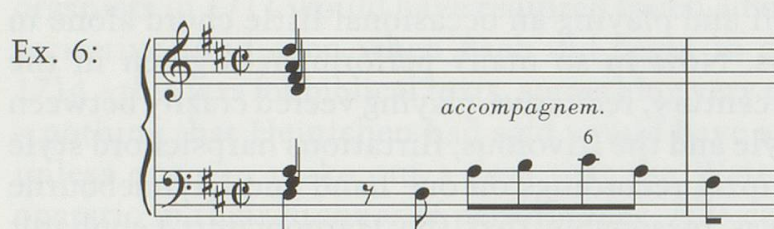
I mention Venetian because it was in Venice in 1708 that Francesco Gasparini published the book from which Heinichen later drew some of his ideas on imaginative harpsichord continuo. I would agree with him that Gasparini's *l'Armonico* is a most valuable source for the continuo-player, perhaps the best and most valuable single volume, even if one does not have an Italian harpsichord available. Better than current French treatises such as St-Lambert, it would have opened any musician's eyes and ears to a freer continuo realization. But so would new Italian music itself, the arias and recitatives that *demanded* variety and imagination from the accompanist. When, for example, Heinichen in 1728 advises that the left hand should take some of the harmony so as to leave the right more free to develop its melodies or to imitate the soloist, he is thinking of music written under Italian influence. As a composer himself, Heinichen was not so very gifted, perhaps, so one has to take his own examples with a pinch of salt: especially their plain rhythms belong to the archaic idioms of provincial Germany. But when he points out that ornaments may be added to inner voices and can create imitation between parts, he is encouraging rich and imaginative music, as he does when he gives his own versions of Gasparini's *acciaccatura* chords. He also knows the virtues both of playing *tasto solo* and of attempting to improvise in strict, trio counterpoint. In short, he knows the range of effects which the harpsichordist has at his disposal, and

if Heinichen did by the late 1720s, it seems hardly likely that J. S. Bach did not. But not only harpsichord effects: Heinichen's book of 1711 makes the first clear and unambiguous reference to one striking effect in organ continuo, namely lifting the right-hand chord in recitative and leaving only the bass playing.

Perhaps we can think a little more about the specifics of *genre*, *chronology* and *geography*. For example, take the particular technique of lifting the right hand in recitative if the sustained sound becomes irksome or covers the singer. This technique became familiar again in our period through the Harnoncourt-Leonhardt recordings of Bach cantatas, where at times one can also hear another technique recommended much later in the eighteenth century, namely, taking both hands off and playing an occasional little chord alone in the right hand, without bass. Now in so many performances given in the middle years of the twentieth century, recitative-playing veered crazily between the heavy sustained organ-style and the frivolous, flirtatious harpsichord style – say the old St. Thomas, Leipzig recordings on one hand and Glyndebourne Opera on the other. So it was reasonable that the Harnoncourt-Leonhardt *Kantatenwerk* should, amongst other things, *freshen up* the approach to recitative-continuo. The problem is that it may be false to assume what Heinichen said at Hamburg in 1711 or Türk at Halle in 1800 to be directly relevant to Bach's church cantatas, particularly if it means that one then makes no distinction in his output – between cantatas composed for Weimar and cantatas composed for Leipzig, or between two versions of the same cantata.

On the other hand, I know it makes good musical sense to play recitative-continuo on the organ very sparingly, just as I know it makes good sense to rely on well-worked four-part chords for making J. S. Bach's harmony clear to the listener. But can one really expect that there were no changes in continuo practice over his forty or more years of producing and revizing cantatas? (Of course, one could ask the same about other details – pitch, say, or the type of choir.) Can we not mark in performance the difference between a Weimar cantata as originally heard in the court chapel, and the same work later revized for Leipzig and heard in one of the city's parish churches? I cannot believe they were identical, and would find it instructive to consider what would or might have been different. For example, in preparing his Sunday performances, did Bach himself pay any attention to the simple fact that a smaller proportion of his congregation in Leipzig than in Weimar could actually read – and therefore follow the text-books? What difference might that make to a performance? Or, is it not likely that the Leipziger sitting in a big gothic hall-church needed the words of the text to be made clearer to them than the courtiers of Weimar did? Are not the Weimar cantatas, for social reasons alone, likely to have been more *operatic* in at least some details of performance, perhaps in their very recitative? Should we not therefore distinguish between them in modern reconstructions?

And then there is the question of genre. Suppose one could answer the question about congegations in Leipzig and prove that indeed by the time of Bach's revivals of the *St. Matthew Passion*, certain techniques were the order of the day – the continuo-organist played short recitative chords on the „Rückpositiv“ Gedackt, for example. What then happened when the Cantor stepped out to the Coffee House, seated himself at the keyboard and put on a concerto in a crowded, smoke-filled room of little resonance? Did he play only a series of discreet four-part chords on the harpsichord? That is hard to believe. There is a hint in the earlier *Fifth Brandenburg Concerto* score that the concerto continuo-player filled up as best he could: the part begins with a seven-part chord in the fair-copy score:



BWV 1049, from autograph score BB Am. B. 78, f. 57.

And this surely invites one to keep up full harmonies. The same chord signals the return to the final ritornello of both the first and last movements, and although it obviously does not prove that all the chords played by the soloist when he is accompanying have to be in seven parts, it certainly shows that tutti chords were not unknown in concerto continuo. Something very similar is suggested in the harpsichord version of the *Fourth Brandenburg* (the Concerto in F major, BWV 1057) where seven-part chords, played higher on the keyboard than one might expect, signal the opening theme whenever it returns. Even here, however, in a brilliant harpsichord concertino/continuo part that varies between two and seven parts, there is a tendency always to return to four. This is also the case at those moments in the harpsichord concertos or violin sonatas when Bach writes in a few continuo chords in the right hand, which he does from time to time.

In this respect, the written obbligato part to the second aria of the secular cantata *Amore traditore* BWV 203 is interesting, for whoever composed it, it does suggest that Italian ideas of harpsichord accompaniment had penetrated central Germany during the period in question. They surely gave a great degree of freedom, with textures ranging from single semiquaver lines divided between the two hands to big chords in eight parts for both hands. Unfortunately, Heinichen says nothing helpful about a question of great interest that I can only touch on here: whether in Italianate concertos of the kind played by the Bach family in Leipzig concerts in the 1730s, solo harpsichord concertos had a second harpsichord to play continuo. This may be suggested by the sources for the Concerto in A major (BWV 1055) and offers a certain parallel to performances of Handel's *Concerti grossi* in London during the very same

years. It is by no means obvious what a second harpsichord, if there were one present, actually played: was it only simple four-part chords or something more extravagant during the *tuttis*, when the string bass doubles at the octave?

I would like to close by stressing that questions like these are matters for careful consideration; they are not merely tricky little problems that need to be dealt with as quickly as possible so that we can get down to the reality of *playing music*. It could be that performers asking about the original attitudes towards the music they are playing are bound to remain somewhat schizoid: what they do as players is one thing, what they understand as scholarly thinkers may be quite different. I don't myself find this objectionable because Performance Practice is not only about performing music but about trying to understand how it was heard and understood during its period. Raising questions about practical matters is something without which our understanding of music itself – not merely its performance – will suffer.

Postscript

The edition of the 1738 *Vorschriften* referred to above as 'forthcoming' (Pamela L. Poulin, *J.S.Bach's Precepts and Principles for Playing the Thorough-Bass or Accompanying in Four Parts*, Oxford University Press, 1994) re-translates Spitta's Appendix II.913ff and describes a background to the treatise. It assumes throughout that differences between it and Niedt's *Handleitung* are changes and additions made by J.S.Bach. However, the source yields no new information either to establish this or to say when, where and by whom the ms was actually written out. A bare translation of Thieme's (later?) titlepage for the new edition's own title is therefore misleading.

The question raised above – why Niedt rather than Heinichen would have been used in Leipzig in 1738 – is not developed, nor what the implications are of Bach's retailing Heinichen 1728 (see *Bach-Dokumente* II, No. 260), nor whether Thieme was correct in the first place to see the ms as concerned with both playing accompaniment and learning four-part harmony. Also misleading is a remark in the new edition's preface (by C. Wolff) that Bach's continuo practice „is apparently also quite well reflected in some later thorough-bass realizations ... such as Kirnberger's keyboard accompaniment for the *Andante*“ of the Musical Offering.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Albinoni: see Gerber

Bach Compendium: ed. H.-J. Schulze & C. Wolff, *Bach Compendium. Analytisch-bibliographisches Repetitorium der Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Leipzig, 1985–).

C. Ph. E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1753, 1762). Especially I, p. 17, figured basses.

C. Ph. E. Bach, letter to Forkel: see *Bach-Dokumente* IV, p. 285.

J. F. Daube, *General-Baß in drey Accorden, gegründet in den Regeln der alt- und neuen Autoren* (Leipzig, 1756).

J. N. Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bach's Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig, 1802), trans. in H. T. David & A. Mendel, *The Bach Reader* (London, 1966), p. 354.

F. Gasparini, *L'armonico pratico al' cimbalo ... per ben suonare il basso, e accompagnare sopra il cimbalo, spinetta ed organo* (Venice, 1708).

H. N. Gerber: see P. Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1879), pp. 125f and Beilage 1.

J. Heinichen, *Neu erfundene und gründliche Anweisung ... zu vollkommener Erlerung des General-Basses* (Hamburg, 1711). Pages 174f, right-hand ornaments, and 226f, arpeggios, short chords.

J. Heinichen, *Der General-Baß in der Composition*, (Dresden, 1728). Pages 583ff, adding imitative ornaments and other „full“ details.

J. P. Kirnberger, *Grundsätze des Generalbasses*, part 3 (Berlin, 1781). Section 3, fig. 51, third movement of *Musical Offering*; see also NBA VIII/1 KB, pp. 78. 81f, 88.

J. P. Kirnberger, *Die wahren Grundsätze zum Gebrauch der Harmonie* (Berlin/Königsberg, 1773).

J. C. Kittel, *Der angehende praktische Organist*, vol. 3 (Erfurt, 1808), p. 33.

L. Mizler, *Musikalische Bibliothek*, vol. 4 (Leipzig, 1738), April, p. 48.

D. Ortiz, *Tratado de glosas sopra clausulas y otros generos de puntos en la musica de violones* (Rome, 1553).

M. de St-Lambert, *Nouveau traité de l'accompagnement du clavecin, de l'orgue et de quelques autres instruments* (Paris, 1707).

D. Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (New York, 1992), pp. 385–6.

C. A. Thieme, Treatise: see P. Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1879), pp. 913–950; partial trans. in David & Mendel, *op. cit.*, pp. 392–8.

Source: see *Bach Dokumente* II, pp. 333–4.

Copyist: see H.-J. Schulze, *Studien zur Bach-Überlieferung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1984), p. 126f and plate 17(b).

J. P. Treiber, *Der accurate Organist im General-Baß. . . worinne, statt der Exempel, nur zweene geistliche General-Bäße [Choralen]. . . durchgeführt sind* (Jena/Arnstadt 1704).

D. G. Türk, *Kurze Anweisung zum Generalbaßspielen* (Halle/Leipzig, 1781). Rev. edn. 1822, pp. 299ff, recitative chords.

P. Williams, „Basso Continuo on the Organ“, *Music & Letters*, 50 (1969), pp. 136–52 (part 1), 230–45 (part 2).