

PARTIMENTO
AND
CONTINUO
PLAYING
IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

Thomas Christensen

Robert Gjerdingen

Giorgio Sanguinetti

Rudolf Lutz

*This ninth publication in the series
"Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute"
is edited by Dirk Moelants*

COLLECTED WRITINGS OF THE
ORPHEUS
INSTITUTE

Leuven University Press

EDITORS

Dirk Moelants
Kathleen Snyers

SERIES EDITOR

Peter Dejans

AUTHORS

Thomas Christensen
Robert Gjerdingen
Giorgio Sanguinetti
Rudolf Lutz

LAY-OUT

Wilfrieda Paessens, Ghent

PRESS

Bioset, 100gr

ISBN 978 90 5867 828 7

D/2010/1869/35

NUR 663

© 2010 by Leuven University Press /
Universitaire Pers Leuven / Presses Universitaires de Louvain
Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

All rights reserved.

Except in those cases expressly determined by law,
no part of this publication may be multiplied,
saved in automated data file or made public in any way whatsoever
without the express prior written consent of the publishers.

THOROUGHBASS AS MUSIC THEORY

Thomas Christensen

Thoroughbass is typically understood today as a largely practical discipline of music, one in which the keyboardist learns to play (or “realize”) the chords encoded in figured-bass notation in some stylistically-appropriate manner.¹ It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of didactic literature used to teach thoroughbass in the 17th and 18th centuries emphasizes this mechanical aspect of chord realization. It is true that this practice is one that may at times blur the boundaries of compositional creativity, or musical *poesis*. (The skills needed for the realization of the thoroughbass and those for compositions were closely related in the Baroque musical world; indeed for many pedagogues, they were viewed as complementary disciplines.)² But thoroughbass nonetheless remained a quintessentially practical skill of music, even if it was a skill demanding a strong “poetic” component of creativity and taste.

It may come as a surprise, then, for us to learn that thoroughbass was also deeply implicated in the speculative music theory of the *Zeitalter des Generalbasses*, as Hugo Riemann designated the period from 1600 to 1750. That is to say, the many challenges of realizing a figured bass for a performer of that time also presented explanatory challenges to speculatively-minded theorists. The pedagogical mnemonics by which figured-bass was taught to young musicians became a surprisingly powerful instigation for remarkable developments in the area of tonal music theory. At the same time, some of the theoretical formulations of these speculative writers were reciprocally applied within the realm of thoroughbass pedagogy.

1. While I will henceforth refer to the keyboard in discussing thoroughbass pedagogy, it should be remembered that it was also possible to realize chords on a strummed instrument such as a guitar or theorbo in some contexts.

2. In a recent article, I have traced in some detail the history of the complex interrelationship between thoroughbass and compositional pedagogies. See Thomas Christensen, “*Fundamenta Partiturae*: Thoroughbass and Foundations of Eighteenth-Century Composition Pedagogy”, in: Thomas F. Kelly & Sean Gallagher (eds.), *The Century of Bach and Mozart: Perspectives on Historiography, Composition, Theory and Practice*, Cambridge Mass. 2008, pp. 17–40.

The equation of composition with thoroughbass in the 18th century was clearly reflected in the titles of many of the most important treatises of the day.³⁷ As late as 1793, theorists such as John Casper Heck wrote that the thoroughbass “may justly be defin’d as a science form’d entirely on the fundamental principles of composition.”³⁸ While Albrechtsberger could write “Der Generalbass ist die Fundamental-Basis der ganzen Musik. Das gründliche Studium desselben unerlässliche Bedingnis für jeden, der sich ernstlich dieses schönen Kunst weihen will.”³⁹

If thoroughbass remained in the estimation of most musicians a lowly, practical art,⁴⁰ there were clearly many others who saw in it something far greater: an art that at its best requires all the skills and imagination of the composer. It is not surprising, then, that many

of these same musicians would analyze the thoroughbass using the tools of music theory. For if the thoroughbass was indeed the *fundament* of musical composition, as so many of its champions claimed, then music theory would offer the means by which its mysteries might most clearly be brought to light — and thereby the secrets of musical composition as well.

37. For examples: François Campion, *Traité d'accompagnement et de composition selon la règle des Octaves de musique*, Paris 1716; Johann David Heinichen, *Der General-Bass in der Composition*, Dresden 1728; Georg Andreas Sorge, *Vorgemach der musikalischen Composition, oder... Anweisung zum General-Bass*, Lobenstein 1745-47; Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Handbuch bey dem Generalbasse und der Composition*, Berlin 1755-60; Johann Friedrich Daube, *General-Bass in drey Accorden... dass also durch diese neue und leichte Anleitung zugleich auch zur Composition unmittelbar der Weg gebahnet wird*, Leipzig 1756; Charles-François Clement, *Essai sur l'accompagnement du clavecin... par les principes les plus clairs et les plus simples de la composition*, Paris 1758; Johann Michael Bach, *Kurze und systematische Anleitung zum General-Bass und der Tonkunst überhaupt*, Kassel 1780; Johann Philipp Kirnberger, *Grundsätze des Generalbasses als erste Linien zur Composition*, Berlin 1781; Edward Miller, *A Treatise on Thoroughbass and Composition*, Dublin 1790.

38. John Casper Heck, *The Art of Playing the Thoroughbass*, London 1793, p. 1.

39. Ignaz von Seyfried (ed.), *Johann Georg Albrechtsberger's Sämmtliche Schriften über Generalbass, Harmonie-Lehre, und Tonsetzkunst*, Vienna 1826, p. 1.

40. For Mattheson, the thoroughbass was more *Hand-Sachen*, requiring only the keyboardist to play the harmonies designated by the chord signatures, and having a good facility of keyboard skills. But to equate this knowledge with the artistic demands of a composer (which for Mattheson above all required an instinct and understanding for natural melody) was absurd. Explaining this later point in his own manual of *General Bass* with his typical sarcasm, Mattheson said putting thoroughbass as the foundation of musical composition was like putting the cart before the horse: “Hergegen wer seinen Untergebenen sogleich über Hals und Kopf zum General-Bass führen; hernach aber, wenn er, mit saurem Schweiss ein ihm gantz unbekanntes gar nicht angenehmes Exempelp, das weder gehauen noch gestochen heisst, gelernet hat, und solches daher dreschen kann, ihm erst von einer Melodie etwas vorsagen, und nach selbiger sich richten heissen vollte, (welches doch unumgänglich geschehen muss) der hätte ja wirklich die Pferde hinten den Wagen gespannt” (*Kleine General-Bass-Schule*, pp. 49-50).