Continuo Practice in the Bach Cantatas:
Instruments and Style

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SOME TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF research into the life and work of J.S. Bach have made available an astonishing amount of information about this elusive composer and his music, from the precise dating of most of his church cantatas to his complaints about working conditions in Leipzig. Quick answers to questions about musical practice are not easy to find, however, in this formidable body of scholarly work. This is especially true of continuo playing, that aspect of Baroque music-making most contingent on local circumstances and subject to endless changes and modifications. This essay therefore reviews what is known about continuo practice in Bach's concerted church works while addressing some of the most common practical questions about instruments and realization styles.

Instruments

The modern revival of Baroque choral music brought about a resurgence of the *positive* (*aka* the continuo or trunk) organ, a small instrument of just a few stops whose primary purpose is to realize bass lines and whose presence is now ubiquitous in performances of this repertory by both modern and period-instrument ensembles. With the restoration of numerous Baroque church organs and the proliferation of instruments inspired by them, the potential of the large organ as a continuo instrument has also become clear, albeit perhaps to a more select group of players. Which is the better choice for a Bach cantata? The answer would seem to be either or both; there are, moreover, other historically appropriate continuo instruments as well. Large church organs, one of the markers of success in Lutheran society since the early seventeenth century, enabled the performance of all kinds of music in the German Baroque, from the monumental *praeludia* of the North Germans to small-scale Italianate chamber works in the most modern styles. There were disadvantages to using the large organ as a continuo instrument, however, not

the least of which was the physical position of the organist, who, sitting at the keydesk of a Schnitger or a Silbermann, was oftentimes completely out of sight, or at best, had his back to the rest of the ensemble. In 1713 Johann Mattheson therefore proposed the smaller *positive* organ and the harpsichord as the best instruments for the realization of figural music in church. Always eager to rid the musical world of its gothic past, Mattheson considered the "rustling, lisping harmony of the harpsichord" a far better alternative to the "snarling, loathsome" regal then still in use in German churches;[1] likewise the *positive* organ was, in concerted music, a portable (and generally quieter) alternative to the large church organ. But in churches without such secondary instruments, organists played concerted music as many of us still do: on organs of all shapes and sizes, the sole requirement being a quiet stop or two to blend with other instruments — and perhaps a good mirror!

In addition to the problem of sightlines, there was in Bach's day one other significant complication to the realization of continuo parts on any church organ, regardless of size: German organs were generally at *Chorton* (choir pitch), while string and wind instruments and harpsichords played at *Cammerton* (chamber pitch), which was typically a full step or even a third lower than *Chorton*, depending on local customs in instrument building.[2] *Chorton* organs were essentially a cost-saving device embraced by frugal Lutherans, who paid less for organs with shorter pipes. This meant that German organists had to know how to transpose, either at sight or on paper, for virtually any concerted music performed in church. Or, they could take advantage of what we might call pre-modern transposers: the literature on this topic mentions a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century instruments with either transposing stops (at both 8' and 4' pitch) or transposing keyboards.[3] Like large Baroque organs, German *positive* organs were normally at choir pitch, at least until the middle of the eighteenth century. All the Leipzig organs, including the Thomas

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[1] Johann Mattheson, *Das neu-eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713), 263.

[2] The most detailed discussions of pitch in Bach's concerted church music are Arthur Mendel, "On the Pitches in Use in Bach's Time," *Musical Quarterly* 41 (1955): 332-54 and 466-80, reprinted in Alexander J. Ellis and Arthur Mendel, *Studies in the History of Musical Pitch* (Amsterdam: Frits Knuf, 1968), 187-224; and Bruce Haynes, *A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of "A"* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 229-63.

[3] See Peter Williams, "Basso Continuo on the Organ," *Music and Letters* 50/1 (January 1969): 136-52, and 50/2 (April 1969): 230-45 (especially at 151); Jerzy Golos, "Basso Continuo on the Organ," correspondence in *Music and Letters* 50/3 (July 1969): 429-30; and Arthur Mendel, "On the Keyboard Accompaniments to Bach's Leipzig Church Music," *Musical Quarterly* 36/3 (July 1950): 339-62 (especially at 349).

School *positives*, seem to have been at *Chorton* until at least 1756, when Bach's successor Johann Friedrich Doles ordered a new *positive* at *Cammerton*.[4]

In the St. Thomas and St. Nicholas choir galleries there were harpsichords as well, and various documents attest to student harpsichordists for the weekly performances of concerted works in church. The best-known of these sources is a report from Johann Christian Kittel, who described a typical scene with his teacher thus:

> One of [Bach's] most capable pupils always had to accompany on the harpsichord. It will be easily guessed that no one dared to put forward a meager thorough-bass accompaniment. Nevertheless, one always had to be prepared to have Bach's hands and fingers intervene among the hands and fingers of the player, and without getting in the way of the latter, furnish the accompaniment with masses of harmonies that made an even greater impression than the unsuspected close proximity of the teacher.[5]

Rehearsals and performances were apparently rather lively affairs, with Bach constantly fixing one thing while improving another. A few documents even mention the composer himself seated at the harpsichord for cantata performances.[6]

Sources for the Bach cantatas contain even more compelling evidence for what Laurence Dreyfus calls "dual accompaniment" in these works. Among the surviving materials are half a dozen instances of duplicate continuo parts (one for organ, the other for harpsichord) for the same cantata, the scores of which occasionally confirm the use of both instruments. In addition, there about forty figured *Cammerton* continuo parts with occasional *tasto solo* markings, which must be for harpsichord since no other instrument playing at this pitch (a cello or a bassoon) would need to be asked to play only the bass notes without any chords. The harpsichord is the most logical continuo instrument for two other groups of sources as well: several cantatas from 1726 with elaborate organ obbligatos have figured *Cammerton* continuo parts, plus Dreyfus cites "tacet" indications in the organ parts for movements in other cantatas where some

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[4] Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach's Continuo Group: Players and Practices in his Vocal Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 21-22.

[5] Hans T. David, Arthur Mendel, and Christoph Wolff, eds., *The New Bach Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 323.

[6] See the reports from Christoph Ernst Sicul on the performance of the *Trauerode* ("Lass dich Fürßtin"), BWV 198, in October of 1727 with "Mr. Bach himself" at the harpsichord, and from Johann Matthias Gesner, in a footnote to his edition of Quintilian's *Institutiones Oratoriae* (*The New Bach Reader*, 136 and 328-29, respectively).

kind of chordal realization is clearly necessary. For these latter works, Dreyfus logically surmises that Bach was simply specifying timbre, not doing away entirely with the continuo.[7]

Why then do we not hear harpsichord more frequently in performances of the Bach cantatas and passions? Dreyfus charts a long history of bias against harpsichord participation in this repertory, dating back to Philipp Spitta's monumental biography of the composer in the late nineteenth century. Interestingly, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary, more recent writers have reaffirmed the mistaken assumption that Baroque sacred music requires organ continuo exclusively. Their relegation of the harpsichord to the secular sphere has given generations of performers and scholars a blinkered view of continuo practice for Bach's music especially.[8]

Continuo realization by more than one chordal instrument was in fact the norm, not only for concerted church music but for virtually all large dramatic works in the late Baroque, especially operas and oratorios, the two most closely related genres. From the beginnings of the basso continuo era, writers on music considered a combination of chordal instruments (e.g., the theorbo with the harpsichord) as one of the most effective ways to realize a bass line. The development of an independent instrumental repertory eventually brought about the combination of a chordal instrument (a harpsichord, organ, archlute or theorbo) with a melody instrument (cello, gamba or bassoon) for solo and trio sonatas. But the harpsichord never disappeared from church music; on the contrary, the steady encroachment of operatic verse and musical forms into German sacred music (in the form of recitatives and da capo arias) from 1700 onwards made harpsichords essential equipment in German churches. Indeed, Mattheson's recommendation of both organ and harpsichord is echoed by other eighteenth-century writers, including C. P. E. Bach, who stipulates that "in all recitatives and arias in [the church] style … a harpsichord must be used."[9]

Of all the major genres, Baroque opera invites the most creativity in continuo realization: at minimum, harpsichord, theorbo (oftentimes more than one of each) and cello are standard equipment, with the possible addition of

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[7] This information is culled from Dreyfus, *Bach's Continuo Group*, 32-68.

[8] Dreyfus, *Bach's Continuo Group*, 10-23.

[9] C.P.E. Bach, as translated by William Mitchell, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 172 [*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* II (Berlin, 1762), 1-2].

Baroque harp, regal, lirone, viola da gamba, bassoon, violone or bass violin. The ever-changing combinations in operatic continuo help shape the drama, with forceful realizations supporting powerful scenes or characters, and delicate sounds those moments of great poignancy or vulnerability. How best to approach the question of "who plays what" in a Bach cantata? As a general rule, organ and harpsichord are used together (which means that the players must follow the same figures) with occasional movements or even just brief moments reserved for one instrument or the other. One telling example in Dreyfus's study illustrates how the organ and the harpsichord can in fact do different things. For a duet in the *Christmas Oratorio*, Part IV, Bach supplied figured continuo parts in both *Chorton* and *Cammerton* but directed the harpsichordist to play just the bass note of a quiet final pedal point (*Cont. tasto solo*); the organ part of this touching little postlude, by contrast, is fully figured.[10] Why? Probably because the organ can mark with greater subtlety the harmonic changes in the upper strings. Texture and mood can in fact affect the choice of continuo instrument for entire movements: in *Ich habe genug* (BWV 82) for example, the gently lulling "Schlummert, ein" aria might not be the best place for a jangly harpsichord, while the final aria "Ich freue mich auf meinen Tod" benefits greatly from its highly articulate sound, either with or without organ. In this cantata the organ might play every movement, with the harpsichord used only in certain arias or sections. Once in a while Bach even provided substantially different continuo lines for each instrument: the first movement of *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (BWV 80) has two bass lines: one marked "Violoncello e cembalo" and the other "Violone ed organo" – and the latter calls explicitly for a 16' pedal stop to be used in this imposing choral fantasy.

Such instructions leave little doubt that Bach occasionally took advantage of the peculiar tonal resources of large church organs in performances of his concerted church works. The many extant transposed continuo parts likewise show that Bach, like most of his contemporaries, regarded the organ (whether large or small) as a regular part of the instrumentarium for such music. Even more notable in this regard is the group of cantatas from 1726 with elaborate organ obbligatos: these solos are notated in *Chorton* and in the score only, leading Dreyfus to propose that Bach himself played the solo parts from the score on the main organ of either the Thomas or Nicholas church. Acoustically, only a large organ makes sense here, since these solos require a fuller sound than most *positives* make. The surviving parts suggest that Bach's

[10] See Dreyfus, *Bach's Continuo Group*, 43.

continuo group for these pieces also included either a *positive* organ or a harpsichord, or perhaps both.[11]

Realization

Turning to the act itself: experienced players and novices alike would do well to consider first how figured bass (or thoroughbass) was once taught. Bach was not alone in starting his pupils with thoroughbass and chorale harmonization; this was in fact precisely the course recommended in most German treatises and tutors. Music instruction in the Latin schools and Gymnasiums likewise began with the realization of bass lines, which held a place roughly analogous to the Hanon exercises or Suzuki method books in our own music education curricula. Thoroughbass served not only as the basis of keyboard technique; it was a fundamental way of thinking about composition: Daniel Speer's *Grundrichtiger Unterricht der musikalischen Kunst* (1697) presents the rules of counterpoint with figured-bass numerals, to emphasize the fact that all music, whether simple or complex, is rooted in the bass.[12] Extant realizations of figured basses from this time are invariably notated in four parts on two staves, the format used in virtually all the published tutors from this time as well.[13] In his own teaching Bach seems to have relied exclusively on this texture: his method book, as copied out by a student at the Thomasschule in 1738, contains numerous realized examples in four parts plus unrealized examples with careful instructions to ensure proper doubling in such a texture.[14]

Not that Bach and his contemporaries always realized bass lines in perfect

[11] Dreyfus cites two different sets of parts with distinct continuo instruments: the materials for BWV 169 (organ solos in movements 1, 3, 5) include the solo parts in *Chorton* in score plus two continuo parts, both in *Cammerton* and one completely figured (for harpsichord); while BWV 29 (organ solos in movements 1 and 7) has a complete *Chorton* organ part, which includes the solo movements plus the continuo line and figures for the other movements, and also a figured *Cammerton* part. Ibid., 67-68.

[12] On German Baroque music education and its reliance on figured bass, see John Butt, "Germany — Education and Apprenticeship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel,* ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11-23, and his *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[13] The handiest of these tutors are those by Johann David Heinichen and Georg Philipp Telemann, both of which have recently been made available in English: see Jesper Christiansen, *18th-Century Continuo Playing: A Historical Guide to the Basics*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2002).

[14] *J. S. Bach's Precepts and Principles For Playing the Thorough-Bass or Accompanying in Four Parts* (Leipzig, 1738), trans. and ed. Pamela L. Poulin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

four-part style: this was a "default" texture meant to be adapted at will and either expanded or contracted, depending on the circumstances. In his chapter on the "'Art' of Accompaniment," Johann David Heinichen advocates a full-voiced accompaniment style on the harpsichord in four, six, or even eight parts, though he hastens to add that on the organ such full voicing is seldom either necessary or desirable.[15] Thinner textures, especially on the organ, are often preferable, not least because they improve the odds for interesting counterpoint. For movements dominated by a single solo line, Friedrich Erhard Niedt offers a useful suggestion:

> If the singer or instrumentalist sounds the interval indicated by the figures, then it is not necessary for the organist to play the same notes above the bass. Instead, he can simply play in thirds as appropriate, or he can do something more artful if he likes.[16]

Writing some fifty years later, Johann Joachim Quantz affirms that in matters of texture and voicing, "an accompanist governs himself more by the individual case than by general rules of thorough-bass."[17]

For the reluctant student of this essential part of the keyboardist's art, the introduction to Niedt's *Musical Guide* (1700) provides a useful cautionary tale. At a rather boozy gathering of musicians and friends, a gifted but shy Capellmeister by the name of Tacitus is asked by his companions how he learned thoroughbass. His story shows by example what not to do: having learned as a student how to play from tablature all sorts of dances, variations, toccatas, chaconnes, fugues, and other "wondrous beasts," Tacitus only then took up figured bass, which he learned neither by counting intervals above the bass nor by deducing chord quality from voice leading, since he could not read modern notation. Instead, his master

> came up with exquisite *Inventiones* on how to teach me, as it were, this Art. The sixth was located on the right side behind my ear, the fourth on the left side, the

[15] *Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen*, revised edition, ed. George J. Buelow (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1986), 175 and 82.

[16] Friedrich Erhard Niedt, *Musicalische Handleitung* (Hamburg: auf kosten des autoris, 1700), vol. 1, ch. VI, rule 8: "Wenn der Sänger oder Instrumentalist die Zahlen welche über dem General-Bass gesetzt sind singet oder spielt so ist es eben nicht nöthig daß der Organist selbige dazu nimmt sondern kann nur die blossen Tertien darnach sichs schicken wil dazu schlagen; Oder wil er etwas Künstlichers dazu machen stehts in einer eignen Beliebung."

[17] Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung der Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin, 1752), 224; trans. Edward R. Reilly as *On Playing the Flute* (2nd ed. 1985, reissued Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 251.

> seventh on the cheek, the ninth in the hair, the diminished fifth on the nose, the second on the back, the minor third on the fingers, the major third and fifth on the shin, and the tenth and eleventh were special kinds of blows to the ears. I had to know what to strike according to wherever the blow or box came down but the best was that my feet were made very nimble on the pedal … through the blows on the shins.[18]

This oft-cited passage, at once hilarious and horrifying, makes clear that the ability to realize a bass line was essential for professional keyboard players during Bach's day. It also confirms that organists were expected not only to realize chords with two hands, as one does on the harpsichord or *positive* organ, but occasionally on large organs with both hands and feet. Use of the pedal in continuo playing is in fact recommended throughout Bach's time, from Speer (1697) to C.P.E. Bach (1762).[19]

Even on an organ with pedals, however, the general custom is for the left hand to play the written bass while the right hand supplies the harmony; the pedal doubles the left hand only when the situation warrants it. Use of the pedal is determined mostly by the size of the ensemble and the volume of sound needed. Niedt allows that in "powerful music employing from ten to twenty, up to thirty or more voices … then [the organist] can also play the fundamental notes on the pedals with his feet and thus demonstrate his art at will."[20] Although Niedt doesn't say so, there is also an obvious economic advantage to such an approach to large ensemble playing: if the organist supplies firm 16' support with the pedal, additional violone players are not needed.

In addition to the variable number of voices, an equally fundamental difference between harpsichord and organ realization styles is the use of sustained chords in the latter. Unlike Italian harpsichord tutors from the seventeenth century, which instruct players to restrike chords for the same reason that Frescobaldi famously gives in the preface to his Toccatas (so as to "not leave the instrument empty"), eighteenth-century German sources are geared mostly toward organists, hence the preponderance of half and whole notes and sustained sonorities in the realized examples.[21] One should not assume that sustain in organ continuo applies equally across the board, however:

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[18] Niedt, *Musicalische Handleitung*, trans. Pamela L. Poulin and Irmgard C. Taylor as *The Musical Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 15.

[19] See Williams, "Basso Continuo," 148 and 150.

[20] Niedt, *Musical Guide*, 28.

[21] See Williams, "Basso Continuo," 145-47.

in *secco recitative* short chords are more appropriate.[22] Heinichen actually gives both options, but observes that most organists lift the chords "the better to hear and observe either the singer or the instruments that sometimes accompany the recitative."[23] Bach himself provides some evidence for shortened chords in *secco recitative*: the bassoon part of *Gleichwie der Regen und Schnee* (BWV 18) has short bass notes in the first recitative, in contrast to long notes in the other continuo parts, probably because Bach's Weimar bassoonist was not familiar with the custom of playing short notes instead of the notated long notes in the bass. More explicit evidence of this practice can be found in the *St. Matthew Passion* and elsewhere in Bach's output, as has been pointed out numerous times in the literature. Alternatively, some theoretical sources advocate lifting just the right hand when the bass note is long,[24] but given the carrying power of most 8' Gedackts in the tenor and bass register, such a practice would not make much difference in a large church, except perhaps to keep an errant singer on pitch. Some writers recommend short organ chords in accompanied recitative as well, but mostly for reasons having to do with tuning. C.P.E. Bach notes that in this kind of recitative, "the organist sustains only the bass in the pedals, and lifts his hands just after striking the chords. Organs are seldom purely tuned," he explains, "and accordingly the harmony in this kind of recitative, which is often chromatic, would sound ugly, and would not agree at all with the accompaniment of the other instruments."[25]

What to do about chord changes announced by figures over rests in the bass? These kinds of indications used to be considered merely informational, as a kind of summary of activity in the upper parts. But recently, several prominent continuo players/scholars have advocated a subtle restriking when the situation warrants

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[22] A number of eighteenth-century German sources may be cited in defense of this practice: J.D. Heinichen, *Der General-Bass in der Composition* (Dresden, 1728); G.P. Telemann, *Singe-, Spiel- und General-Bass-Übungen* (Hamburg, 1733); J.C. Voigt, *Gespräch von der Musik* (1742); G.J.J. Hahn, *Der wohl unterwiesene General-Bass-Schüler* (Augsburg, 1751/1768); C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1754/1762); and D.G. Türk, *Kurze Anweisung zum Generalbasspielen* (Leipzig and Halle, 1791).

[23] As quoted in Mendel, "On the Keyboard Accompaniments," 357, from Heinichen's *Neu erfundene und Gründliche Anweisung* (1711).

[24] Mendel, "On the Keyboard Accompaniments," 359, cites both Hahn, *Der wohl unterwiesene General-Bass-Schüler* (1751) and J.S. Petri, *Anleitung zur practischen Music* (1767).

[25] C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch* II, xxxviii, § 5; as quoted and trans. in Mendel, "On the Keyboard Accompaniments," 355.

it.[26] Unfortunately, a general rule for such problem spots cannot be deduced from either the tutors or the sources, which rarely if ever address the issue.

The doubling of fugal entries in imitative movements poses a different kind of problem: several sources confirm this practice, yet a too-slavish adherence to it can be not only pedantic but also unhelpful. Handel apparently doubled imitative entries routinely in his oratorio choruses, partly to fill in the harmony, but he also sometimes noted that such passages are to be played *tasto solo*, as single lines.[27] Some German theorists encourage such doubling as well, but a set of realizations made in the early 1770s for Bach's Second Orchestral Suite and a substantial portion of the *St John Passion* suggest that continuo doubling of imitative entries in the upper parts was not a part of the regular practice of Bach and his circle.[28] Ultimately, no hard and fast rule for such passages can be found in the tutors or deduced from the musical sources, just general agreement that imitative entries may be doubled by the continuo when there is no fundamental bass line. Similarly, there is little consensus on whether or how often to repeat chords in the right hand when there are either passing tones or repeated notes in the bass, just general agreement that re-striking happens more on the harpsichord than on the organ, due to the quick decay of the former and the inherent sustain of the latter.

Ultimately, good continuo playing — regardless of the particular repertory or instrument — depends more on the player's ability to listen closely and to contribute artfully to the music-making than on the relative "correctness" of any realization. An elaborately scored aria with an instrumental obbligato (or two) may require a treatment different from that given an aria with just a single solo line. Similarly, a recitative full of diminished seventh chords and gruesome imagery (of which there's no shortage in J.S. Bach) necessitates an approach hardly suited to the simpler, more diatonic recitatives of his contemporaries. Despite the rather unimaginative style of the tutors, Bach's own manner of continuo playing was apparently quite ornate: he was said to have invented on the spot melodies for the right hand of equal or greater interest than the

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[26] Lars Ulrik Mortensen, "'Unerringly tasteful'? Harpsichord Continuo in Corelli's Op. 5 Sonatas," *Early Music* 24/4 (1996): 665-79. See also Christiansen, *18th-Century Continuo Playing*, 92.

[27] See Williams, "Basso Continuo," 146.

[28] See Jörg-Andreas Bötticher, "Generalbaßpraxis in der Bach-Nachfolge. Eine wenig bekannte Berliner Handschrift mit Generalbaß-Aussetzungen," *Bach Jahrbuch* 79 (1993): 103-25, and Bötticher, "Regeln des Generalbasses: Eine Berliner Handschrift des späten 18. Jahrhunderts," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 18 (1994): 87-114.

notated solo parts.[29] The emphasis placed on improvisation in keyboard playing doubtless meant that the better players of this era had no trouble realizing bass lines in various styles to suit the occasion.

Improvisation brings us to one last aspect of German Baroque continuo practice that has virtually disappeared, even among leading practitioners of historically-informed performance. Part II of Niedt's *Musical Guide* is devoted to the topic of free improvisation or "preluding," which he and Mattheson both recommend in advance of concerted music, on "full organ or otherwise with strong registration" so that the instruments may be discreetly tuned to the organ.[30] Nearly a hundred years earlier, Praetorius explained the most effective way to do this: by beginning with a pedal on G, since that is the lowest string of the violin and the lute (in its most common setup), adding "nice runs and other diminutions in the right hand, as is customary in toccatas," then progressing to the other open string notes (D, A, E, C, F) in a like manner, until all the instruments have been properly tuned.[31] Today we tend to view any attempt on the part of string or wind players to tune during an organ prelude as ineffective (and perhaps even rude), yet that seems to be exactly what happened in European churches for centuries. Organ improvisation may be alive and well, but the custom of tuning instruments during an improvised organ prelude is hardly commonplace.

An excellent summary of the fundamentals of eighteenth-century continuo practice can be found at the end of Niedt's tutor, as amended and edited by Mattheson. Paraphrasing freely, Niedt's rules may be shortened and restated as follows:[32]

1) Make sure that the basics of figured bass realization are learned before developing a more personal style.
2) Use sustain judiciously in the right hand, especially when there's a repeated-note or quickly moving bass line.

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[29] See the reports from Lorenz Christoph Mizler (1738) and Johann Friedrich Daube (1756) in *The New Bach Reader,* 328 and 362, respectively.

[30] Niedt, *Musical Guide*, 142.

[31] Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum*, Pt. III, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Kite-Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 151.

[32] This is a summary of the information in Niedt, *Musical Guide*, Part III, 260-61.

3) Stay out of the way of the soloists.[33]

4. Avoid fast notes in the pedal.

Otherwise said: learn the rudiments of thoroughbass, either from a book or a teacher (preferably both), then strive to make every realization both technically sound and musically satisfying.

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[33] When either a singer or an obbligato instrument sounds above the bass, organists need to learn, as Niedt puts it, to "not put in their two cents as well and drone along … thus ruin[ing] the entire harmony so miserably and calamitously with their desperately frisky trills, their grunting accents, their lowing coloraturas, their jackass intervals, and their yelping and caterwauling runs to which they have been accustomed from time immemorial" (as translated by Poulin and Taylor in *A Musical Guide,* 261). Strong feelings about overly ambitious continuo realizations are apparently not a modern phenomenon!