

Continuo - The Improvising Orchestra



The most typical early 17th-century continuo is **Organ & Theorbo**.



Church music was accompanied by **Organ**. Viadana (1602) recommends simple harmonies without ornamentation, doubling the bass in low octaves. Monteverdi (1610) specifies the metal pipes of the *Principale*, adding more registers for large ensembles.

Court chamber music and 'early opera' were accompanied by the delicate sound of **organo di legno** with wooden or paper pipes (Cavalieri 1600, Monteverdi 1607), playing simply, low and slow (Agazzari 1607).



The **Theorbo** or *Chitarrone*, a large bass-lute with an extra set of very long strings for the lowest notes, was specially developed to play continuo. It suits the tenor voice particularly well (Caccini 1601).

Kapsberger (1604) shows the 'default arpeggio' – the bass note comes on the beat.



The **arpa doppia** (large chromatic harp) is useful throughout the whole range from soprano to bass. As a fundamental accompaniment it sustains simple harmonies: in ornamental solos it makes dialogues between the two hands and trills. (Agazzari 1607, Monteverdi 1607).



The **Regal** is a reed organ with a strong, rhythmic sound.

It accompanies the cornett & sackbut band and the bass voice, particularly in scenes set in Hell. (Monteverdi 1607)

The **gravicembalo**, a large **Harpsichord** used for fundamental accompaniment, also provides the basic harmonic and rhythmic structure, playing simply and low (Agazzari 1607).



Monteverdi (1607) uses it in combination with one, two or even three theorbos.

Directing the rhythm with 'the sound & passion of the text' (Agazzari 1607)



The opening phrase from the first published work to use **figured-bass** notation, Cavalieri's *Anima e Corpo* (Rome, 1600)



Early 17th-century treatises give advice on understanding harmony, and also explain the role of each instrument in the continuo-band.

Agazzari, published in the same year as Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, begins by dividing instruments into two classes.

Fundamental instruments guide and support the whole ensemble (i.e. what we normally mean by **continuo** today).

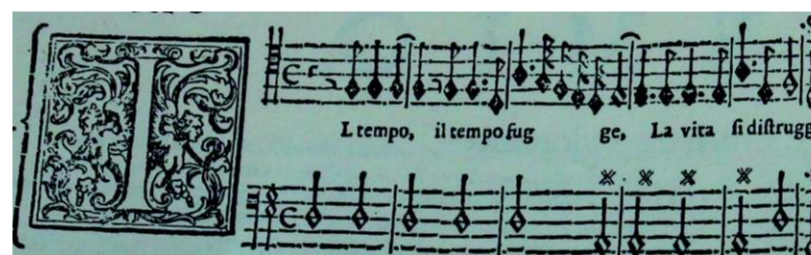
Ornamental instruments, *scherzando*, 'have fun' with counterpoint (i.e. improvising **solo** divisions over the bass) or make the harmony more sonorous (e.g. with the rich sound of the liron).

Continuo directs the whole ensemble (Agazzari 1607, *Il Corago* c1630). The tactus-beat can be shown by the hand of a continuo-player for large ensembles (*Il Corago*), or by multiple conductors where there are several choirs (Praetorius 1619). Recitative is not conducted (*Il Corago*, Monteverdi 1638).

In the early 17th century, instruments played together in homogenous 'choirs': a consort of viols, violin band, cornetts & sackbuts, loud wind instruments.

But the continuo section, which at this period could represent half or more of the whole ensemble, brought together different types of instrument to improvise together from the written bass-line.

Continuo-playing was especially important for the new dramatic style of **recitar cantando**, 'acting in song', the foundation of early opera.



With or without the assistance of figures, continuo players must play appropriate **harmonies** from the written bass-line.



Continuo instruments are Baroque imitations of the ancient Greek **ctetra**, the mythical lyre of Apollo.

But Italian paintings show Orpheus and Apollo not with a plucked lute, but with a bowed instrument of the 16th century, the philosopher's **lira da braccio**.



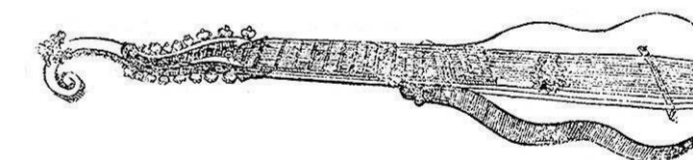
The 17th-century **lirone** was a larger version of the *lira da braccio*, playing sustained string harmonies with long bow-strokes. Like the guitar, it could not play perfect counterpoint, but Agazzari (1607) prizes its clear and sonorous sound in the middle register.



Although the **Guitar** is contrapuntally 'imperfect' (the written bass-note might not sound as the bottom of the chord), it is very effective as a fundamental accompaniment, and adds exciting colour with rhythmic strumming. Cavalieri (1600) recommends guitars and tambourine in dance-rhythms as the sound of Pleasure.



A large **Irish harp**, described by Galileo (1581) and Praetorius (1619) accompanied consorts in England and Denmark. Peerson (1620, 1630) recommends it as a substitute for organ continuo.



The metal strings of **Bandora** (Agazzari 1607) or **Arch-cittern** (Praetorius 1619) add sonorous colour.



Large **Drums** were associated with soldiers, fifes and fanfares. Small drums accompanied renaissance dancing (Arbeau 1589).

Cavalieri (1600) recommends **Tambourine** together with guitars, and Praetorius (1619) says that players throw it up into the air and catch it again.

Consort Basses

Early Italian continuo typically uses chordal instruments without a melodic bass. (Agazzari 1607, Monteverdi 1607, Dixon 1986). Melodic bass instruments play the written bass-lines of ensembles in homogenous consorts, or a solo bass line in sonatas for canto e basso.

Monteverdi (1607) uses **Viola da Gamba** to double written bass-lines in large ensembles, and Ortiz (1553) shows how to improvise solos. The lyra-viol style of bowed or plucked chords is predominately English.

The main function of the **Bass Violin** was as the lowest voice of the violin band. But Monteverdi (1607) calls for a combination of harpsichord, chitarrone and bass violin as a 'sound of disturbance'.

Dulcian or **Bass Sackbut** (Monteverdi's *trombone doppio*) play the lowest voice of wind-bands.



The **Lute**, most noble of all instruments, can accompany a small ensemble or play ornamental divisions. (Agazzari 1607). Peri (1600) suggests a large lute, Monteverdi (1607) prefers theorbos.



Monteverdi (1607) uses a **contrabasso** in large ensembles, and Agazzari (1607) asks for the slow resonant sound of a **violone**, often playing an octave lower than written.

