The 20th-Century Performer as Interpreter of the Baroque Tradition

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I

The problems involved in the performance of Baroque music have received an unusual amount of attention during the last twenty years. In this country, especially, they have involved scholars, performers, and some scholar-performers in a kind of battlefield situation, where participants attack one another with ornaments, dots, sources, and other suitable weapons. Among the many subjects of discussion and dispute are time signatures, "over-dotting," the problems of inequality (*notes inégales*), combined duple and triple figures, tempo, articulation, and even rubato. Little has been done, however, to utilize modern systems of analysis, e.g., the Schenkerian method, as a means of furthering musical "realization."

The purpose of this essay is to utilize various of my conclusions concerning Baroque performance practice and to combine them with a linear (Schenkerian) analysis, in order to arrive at a performance version for the first twenty-one measures of Bach's C Minor Praeludium, S.537, with the areas or notes of rubato indicated in the text. Before proceeding to the written-out version, it would, perhaps, be helpful to present my conclusions about Baroque performance practice and to illustrate these bars with a graph. Limitations of space make it impossible to "realize" the whole work or to present a complete, thoroughly documented discussion; section II is, therefore, confined to my conclusions and a few of the important sources involved.

In the many articles on Baroque music (including over 100 in English alone) which have been published during the past twenty years, the same passages are quoted repeatedly. Yet each of the various authors interprets them according to his individual biases and perhaps his own psychic make-up. This psychological factor is an important consideration in understanding an author's conclusions. Even the composer or writer under study has a psychic make-up which must be included in an analysis of his work.

Two questions are generally involved in dealing with music for which the performing tradition is no longer "living": Is a historically valid performance possible? Is it desirable? In an absolute sense, the only truly valid historical performance occurred when the composer performed his work in a way which he considered pleasing or satisfactory. The so-called historical "stuff" is what the composer heard in his own mind. Next in degree of validity would be the recollection of that performance by one of the composer's own students. The variable factors here might be the student's musical gifts, his stage of development, and, again, his psychic make-up. The third level of reliability would be a performance by a student coached by the composer. In the 20th century we are at the end of the line, with neither composer, student, nor era

at hand. The whole list of variables might include the quality of performance, the skill of the executant, his age, his health, any neurotic problems involved, nervousness, the temperature of the hall, and the relative accuracy of the memory of any listener recounting what he heard. Certainly in an absolute sense a truly "historic" modern performance is neither playable nor hearable.

The second question is whether a historically valid performance is desirable. In the last century the philosopher Hegel said that history overrides the individual, that the reason for everything lies in history. The reaction to this thesis by Bultmann and later by Heidegger is not unlike the reaction of many musical performers and historians today when they claim that the real communication of the music, whether historically valid or not, can be achieved only by an authentic but individual statement. History's blessing is therefore peripheral at most. In my opinion, it is impossible to know whether that blessing can even be recognized.

One must make choices in playing even a single note, and one therefore strives to perform in a historically plausible way. The better the restrictions are known, the easier the choice. I believe that the treatises of the Baroque era imposed too few limits to permit historically valid performances, that these treatises were addressed primarily to beginning students of performance, composition, or figured-bass realization, and, furthermore, that these documents became less helpful as the music became more complex. Anyone attempting to perform a work of the Baroque period must bridge this huge gap, and it is the differences in approach to this problem that account for so many varied conclusions among scholars and performers. The following is my own solution.

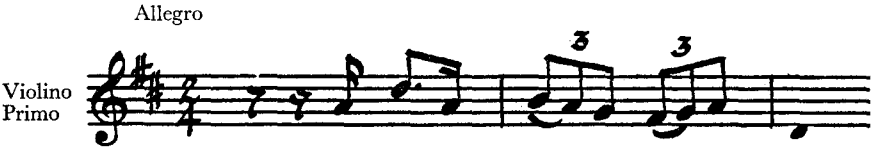
II

The time signatures employed by such composers as J. S. Bach, Handel, and Corelli reflect a usage already employed during the Renaissance and discussed thoroughly by Morley in his *Plaine and Easie Introduction* . . . (1597). The signature indicated tempo by means of the "tactus" and the number of beats per bar (further suggesting articulation and bowing). The clue for this is that the composers mentioned above employed the combined signatures of this system which would have no meaning in music not rooted in this older tradition. Some examples are: the *Prelude in D Major, WTC II*: ¢ $\frac{12}{8}$; the *Fugue in E Major, WTC II*: ¢ 𝅗𝅥, in the copy by Hoffmeister; Cantata No. 7, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam*, the tenor aria: $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{9}{8}$. The signatures gave a definite beat pattern dependent on the fastest moving note. In the examples just cited, $\frac{12}{8}$ with sixteenth notes had four pulses per bar; the ¢ limits it to two. The signature ¢ 𝅗𝅥 indicates double cut time and gives one accent per bar; $\frac{9}{8}$ with no sixteenths indicates two accents per bar, on one and three. The added $\frac{3}{4}$ gives it three accents per bar.

In their earlier meaning, Italian words of movement, such as *vivace*, *allegro*, or *largo*, alter the normal pulsation schemes of the signatures. It is only

later that they refer to tempo. In the third movement of the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5*, the normal one-pulse-per-bar of $\frac{2}{4}$ is contradicted by the term *allegro*, which means: follow the accent pattern as given by the composer, that is, two accents per bar throughout (Ex. 1). The first movement of the

EXAMPLE 1



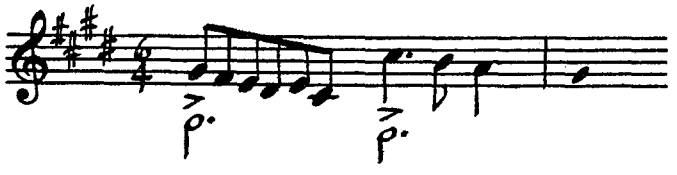
Concerto in the Italian Style needs no Italian word to change the normal pulse of $\frac{2}{4}$. The single chord in the bass of m. 1 confirms the normal pulse relationship of $\frac{2}{4}$. An added *allegro* would have been superfluous. Important sources describing these occurrences of time signatures include Christopher Simpson's *A Compendium or Introduction to Practical Musik* (first edition, London, 1667); M. Praetorius's *Syntagma musicum* (1619); J. J. Rousseau's *Methode claire, certaine, et facile* . . . (1678); Sebastien de Brossard's many articles concerning time signatures in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1705); Heinichen's *Der Generalbass in der Musik* (1728); and J. J. Quantz's *Versuch einer Anweisung* . . . (1752). Other authors writing on signatures include Muffat, Walther, C. P. E. Bach, and Leopold Mozart.

Tempo was determined by means of the signature and the fastest moving note-value. Most of the opinions about the value of the tactus vary from sixty to eighty on the metronome. As an example, common time or C would have four pulses per bar, each pulse worth the value of the tactus. *Presto* doubles the speed, and *largo* halves it. (Quantz, in Chapter XVII of his *Versuch*, also deals with the various tempo values in strict arithmetical proportions, i.e., doubling or halving.) A knowledgeable performer in the Baroque era would have played any work at the "correct" tempo, given his variation of tactus.

Often one finds thematic writing in Bach corresponding to the accent patterns of the signature (Exx. 2 and 3). Bach combines Renaissance complexity and proportional relations with beautiful and memorable melodic ideas.

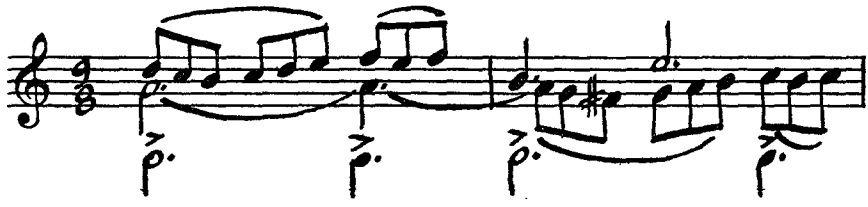
EXAMPLE 2

Prelude in C♯ minor, *WTC I*



EXAMPLE 3

Kyrie, "Gott heiliger Geist," BWV 674
m. 2

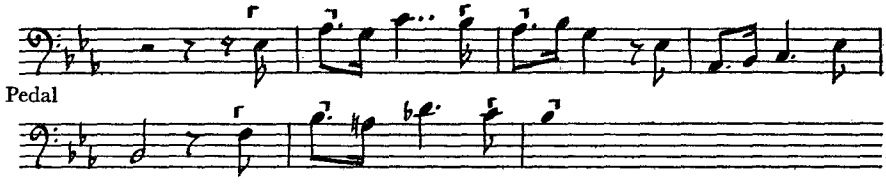


Slurs over pairs of notes (usually eighths or sixteenths) can be realized as the first note long and the second short, or the first short and the second long. This method of performance applies especially to keyboard music at a faster tempo. An early important historical source for this is Frescobaldi's Preface to his *Toccate* (Rome, 1614). Beyond a certain tempo (c. 108 on the metronome, two pairs per beat), paired slurred notes will not sound equal in performance. An experiment at a keyboard will confirm this.

Dotted notes are frequently "overdotted." Most Baroque composers wrote the value of the note or notes following a dotted note equal to the value of the dot: ♩. 𝅘𝅥𝅯 or ♩. 𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯. However, the note or note groups following the dot are frequently played faster. Their "played" relationship is often mentioned in Baroque sources. This so-called "sharpening" of the dot can be found as late as 1850 (Ex. 4). Here the composer writes what he wants the first time, and

EXAMPLE 4

F. Liszt, Organ Fantasia and Fugue on "Ad nos . . . ,"
3rd section, mm. 56–62



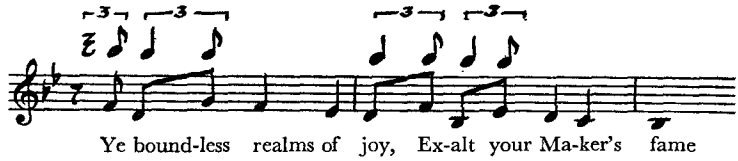
then, in a subsequent sequential repetition, the same passage appears with the older notational scheme for dotted notes. Both should be played the same way.

The principle of *notes inégales* existed outside of France as a convention. Certain Baroque works, including those of Bach and Handel, sound much more "revealed" when the principles of inequality are applied (Ex. 5).

EXAMPLE 5

G. F. Handel, Chandos Anthem, "O Praise the Lord with One Consent"

realized as



There is a certain "corpus" of ornamentation (trills, passage work, and cadenzas) proper to all Baroque composers within individual compositional styles. If not supplied by the author, it should be provided by the performer. By studying works ornamented by the composer, a student will learn to realize a nonornamented work.

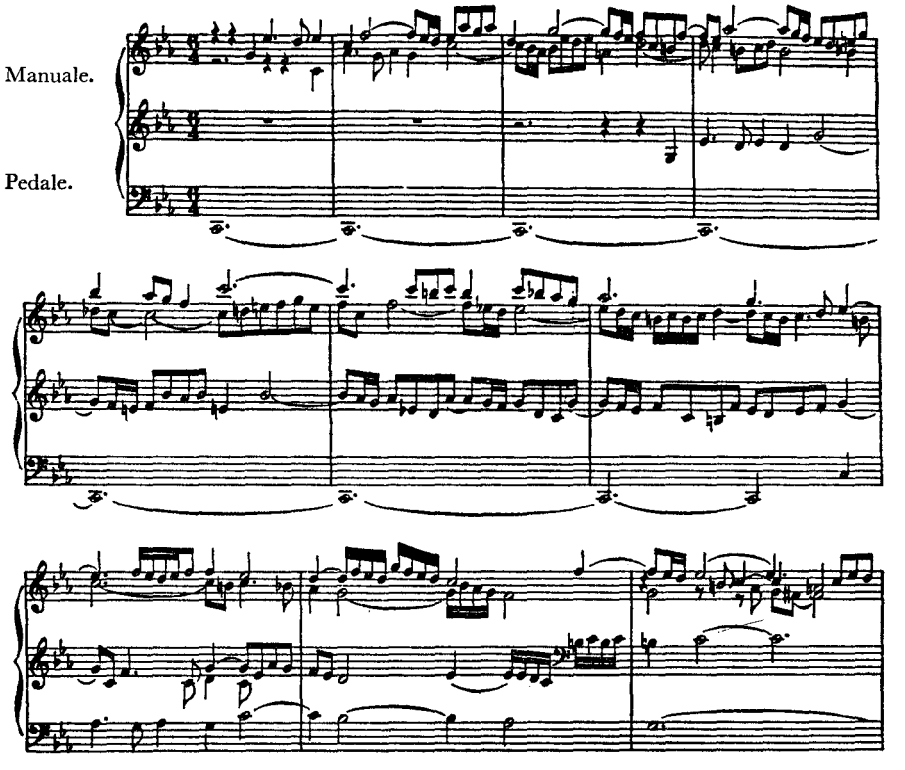
Rubato of some kind is proper to all music. It cannot be applied mechanically except in the case of certain dance forms. A compositional or linear analysis, such as that which follows, will reveal the important structural points of a composition, and rubato should be used to highlight these situations.

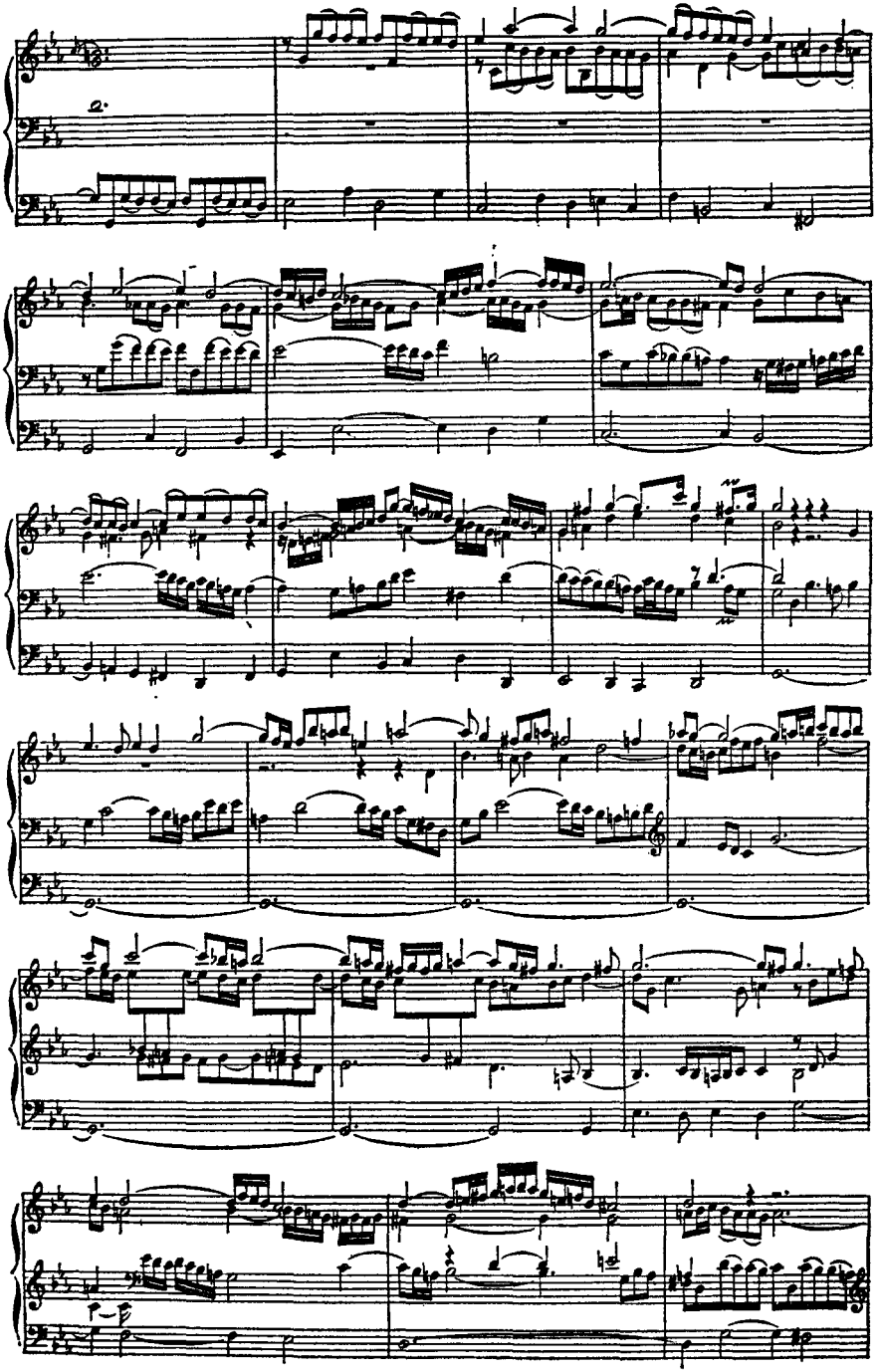
Example 6 shows the basic text of the opening of the *Praeludium in C Minor* by J. S. Bach (Vol. XV, Bach-Gesellschaft Edition, Leipzig, 1867). Example 7 is the graphic analysis, showing a work based predominantly on motion in thirds. The basic-line "g" is arrived at in m. 7 and is solidified in m. 21 via a descending scale passage. Later, this is imitated in the bass.

EXAMPLE 6

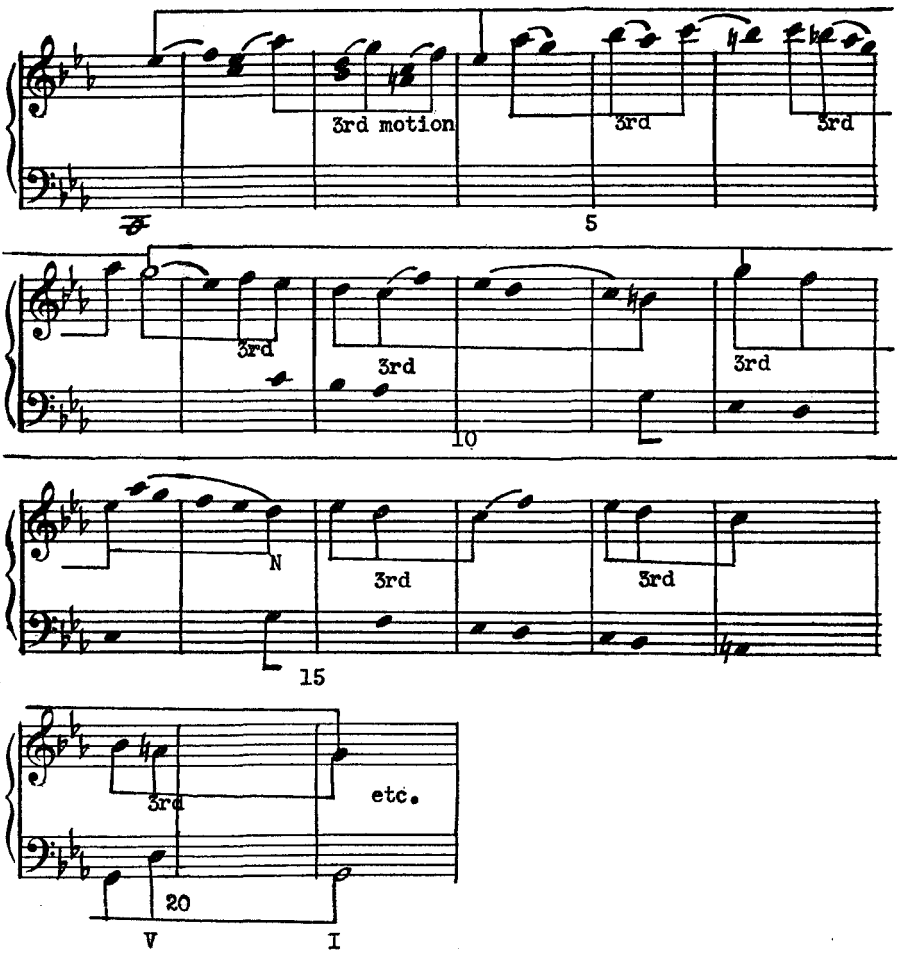
PRAELUDIUM ET FUGA VII.

Praeludium (Fantasia).





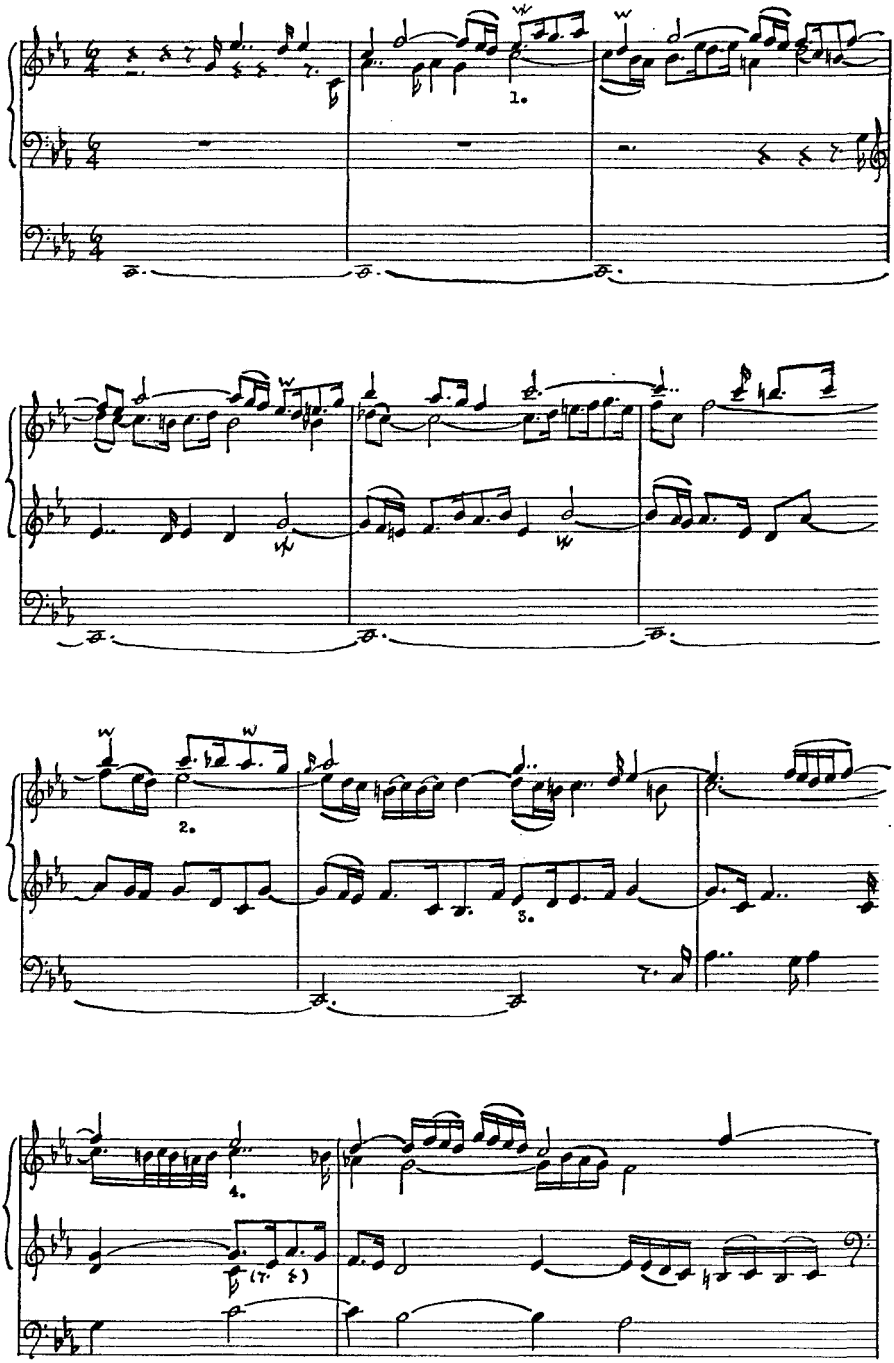
EXAMPLE 7

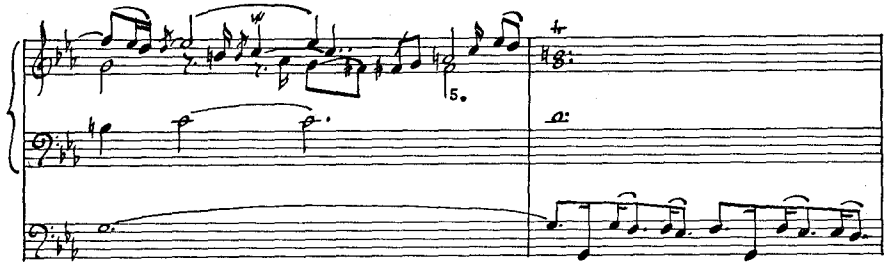


Example 8 is the altered version. The alterations are based on the following: (a) the normal inequality procedures in $\frac{6}{4}$ (this would include eighths and sixteenths); (b) slurred pairs realized as short-long patterns; (c) up-beat notes shortened; (d) ornaments supplied where needed.

The rubato reasoning is as follows: nos. 1, 2, and 6 highlight the motions in thirds; no. 3 the entrance of the main-line "g"; no. 4 the end of a motion in thirds; no. 5 the ending of two third motions combined; no. 7 the redundant E♭–d–c motion; no. 8 the false bass motion; no. 9 the cadence. The amount of rubato (usually slowing down the beat before the point of arrival) varies, as Couperin said, according to "good taste."

EXAMPLE 8

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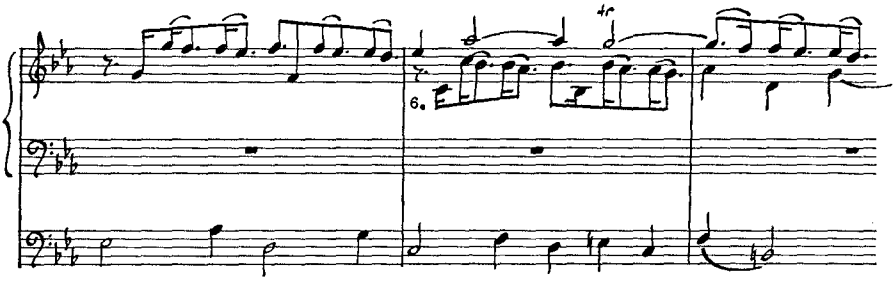
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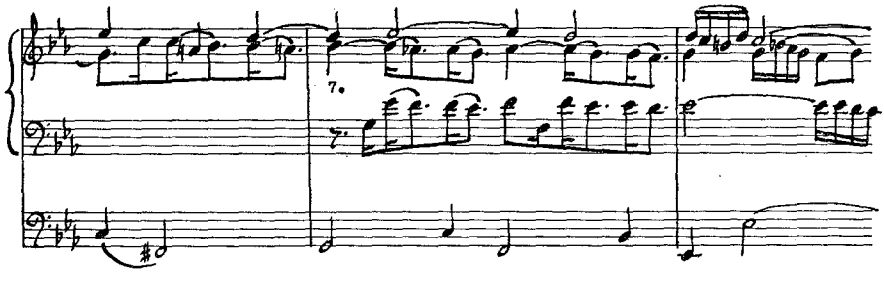
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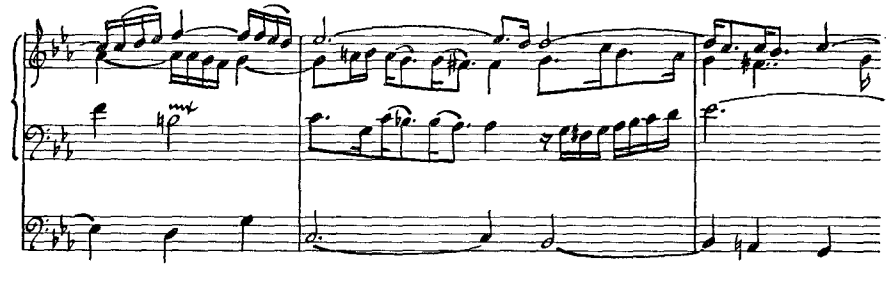

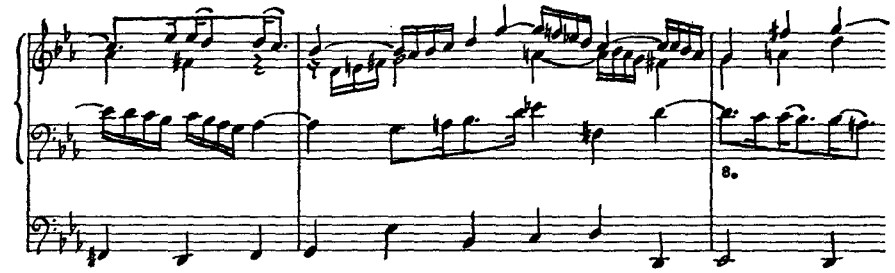
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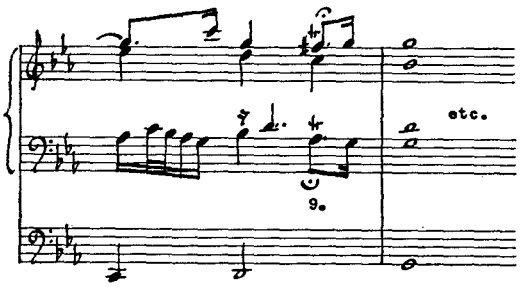
etc.
9.