Introduction to Embellishment of Renaissance Music
by Bill Long

What is Embellishment?

Embellishment is adding notes to a part to make it more interesting for the player and listener. In *The Division Viol*, Christopher Simpson says of embellishment,

> In this manner of Play, which is the perfection of the *Viol,* or any other Instrument, if it be exactly performed, a man may shew the Excellency both of his Hand and Invention, to the delight and admiration of those that hear him.

It probably started when dance band players got tired of playing the same tune over and over and started to change it a little each time, improvising a few trills on the first repeat, some runs the second time through, then progressing to increasingly virtuosic passagework. The players' inspirations were soon codified into sets of rules that found their way into the instrumental instruction books of the time. These have found their way to us, so we can add embellish renaissance music in a way that is probably pretty close to the way it was done four centuries ago.

About This Paper

This paper is intended as practical introduction, mainly for the recorder player, especially the recorder player performing renaissance dances. In writing it, I've taken information from six sources, two primary and four secondary, namely:

- Brown, Howard Mayer (1976). *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Dart, Thurston (1961). Notes to *Twenty-Four Pieces from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, London: Stainer & Bell Ltd;
- Dart, Thurston (1961). notes to *Parthenia In-Violata,* New York, C. F. Peters.
- Ganassi, Sylvestro (1535), edited by Hildemarie Peter. *Opera Intitulate Fontegara*, Venice.
- Gleason, Harold (1996), edited by Catharine Crozier Gleason. *Method of Organ Playing, Eightj Edition*, Toronto: Prentice-Hall
- Simpson, Christopher (1659). *The Division-Viol*, London.

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Throughout, I've oversimplified shamelessly and left out any scholarly citations. Anyone interested in getting a scholarly grasp of the subject should go to the sources above which will, in turn, open the door to hundreds of books and articles on the subject. Brown's brief volume is especially helpful. It seems to be out of print now, but it's still possible to get copies through resellers.

Types of Embellishment

Graces

The easiest embellishments to improvise are the graces. These are trills and other short ornaments. Among them are four main types:

- Inverted mordant
- Trill
- Slide
- Cadential pattern

You can invent other graces by combining these basic types.

In the baroque era there was an elaborate set of symbols for the different ornaments. That's not the casein the renaissance, so we'll adapt some symbols from the baroque and renaissance just for simplicity.

inverted mordant

The inverted mordant is a quick jump up a step from the main note to the auxiliary note, then back.

trill

The trill is just an inverted mordant with more "wiggles". Note that by going up from the main note to the auxiliary, these renaissance ornaments go in the opposite direction from the more familiar baroque counterparts.

slide

In the slide, the player just slips up to the main note.

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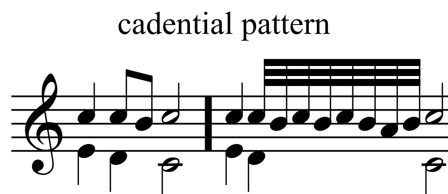
Cadential patterns are the renaissance version of the obligatory cadential trill in baroque music. The example shows the most common pattern.



Divisions

Divisions connect notes of the melody with rapid scale-like passages. They are called divisions because they “divide” a long melody note into a bunch of short notes. Divisions are sometimes called *diminutions* in English, or *passaggi* in Italian. There are a lot of less common names in various languages.

The method for creating divisions is described by Sylvestro Ganassi in his *Fontegara* as follows:

> …every division must begin and end with the same note as the unornamened ground…so doing, it will be a tastefully constructed ornament.

Most commonly, a note is broken up into two or four notes. Sixteenth century writers described more virtuosic and complicated metrical divisions, but we we’ll stick to the more straightforward ones here.

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Of course there was a lot of freedom in improvising divisions, but we can write some rules which govern the process in a general way:

- Form an element of a division by starting with a note of the melody and ending with the next note of the melody.
- Divisions consist mainly of scale like passages. Intervals larger than 2nds may be used sparingly.
- Divisions should be reasonably consistent with the underlying harmony of the piece.
- Divisions should not include simple arpeggiations of the harmony. That suggests tonal relationships that didn't evolve for another century or two.
- Insert accidentals necessary to make passages smoother, as dictated by "good taste".

The last point brings up the tricky subject of *musica ficta*, the practice of adding accidentals to notes to make them sound better to renaissance ears. That's tough for modern performers since we don't have renaissance ears. Editors help out by suggesting changes with accidentals over notes, but we're on our own in creating divisions. Two hints:

- When scale passages go up to the 7th scale degree and then turn around, flatting the 7th neutralizes the upward pull of the leading tone. In the example below, note the Bb inserted in the 2nd measure.

from *La Morisque* by Tielman Susato

Melody

Division

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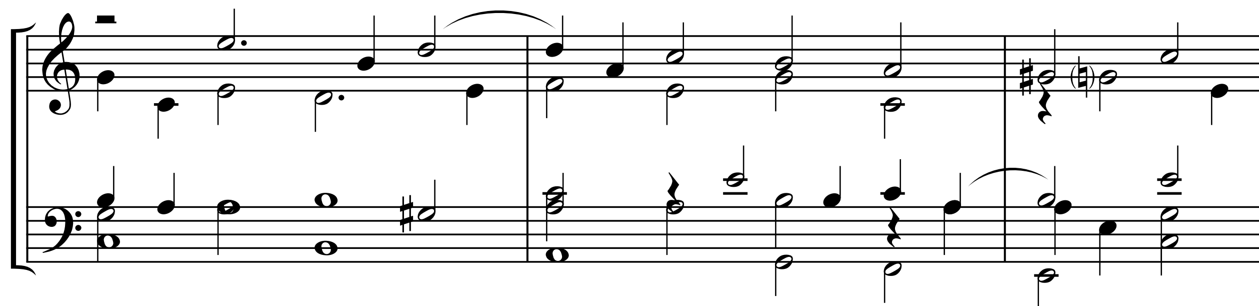
☛ Often clashes are introduced when a note is raised or lowered in one part but not another. These *cross relations* sound terrible to modern ears, but renaissance composers, especially the English, actually *liked* them and we can learn to love them, too. Here's an example from a famous piece by John Dowland. Note the clash between the G# and the G natural in the last measure.

from *Lachrimae Antiquae* by John Dowlnd



The moral is, don't worry too much about cross relation dissonances when making up divisions.

These "rules" are anything but rigid and exceptions abound in historical practice. You can find historical examples of divisions in the appendices, complete with plenty of transgressions against the rules.

Who Embellishes their Part?

Who performs embellishments depends on the nature of the music. In homophonic music like dances where the melody is in the top part and the other instruments mostly just play chordal accompaniment, all the embellishment should be done by the top part and that player can really go to town with elaborate graces and divisions. On the other hand, in polyphonic music like fantasies where all the parts are equally important, all players may embellish their parts but with considerable restraint, perhaps just adding a cadential patterns and a few other graces.

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Articulation

In renaissance embellishment, especially divisions, performers have to play a lot of notes in a little bit of time. On wind instruments like the recorder, it's not to hard to get fingers moving, but tongues are generally a lot slower. There are three ways to approach the problem of rapid tonguing:

- Single tongue very fast.
- Slur.
- Double tongue.

Now some players just can single tongue really rapidly. If you're one of them, do it. It's simple and gives wonderful control. But most of us can't, and even those who can bump into physiological limits when the passagework is too fast.

Slurring is a common option in modern music, but it was frowned on in the renaissance. It's probably all right to slur very, very fast divisions, so long as only a small number of notes are slurred at a time. Likewise, it may be necessary to slur graces in fast tempos. But whatever you do, don't fall into a slur-two-tongue-two pattern because that was never used in early music.

Historical instruction books spent a lot of time on double tonguing with a plethora of tonguing syllables. It is a much vexed subject. Oversimplifying a bit, double tonguing possibilities reduce to two options:

- Modern double tonguing in which alternates the syllables te-ke for duple meters and te-ke-te for triple meters.
- Historical tonguing, the most easy and effective of which uses the syllables di-del for duple meters and di-del-di for triple meters.

Modern tonguing is easy to learn and produces a nice staccato separation of notes. It's a good special purpose tonguing, especially useful when notes are repeated rapidly, but it's too choppy for general use. Renaissance writers mention this tonguing sometimes, but the didn't like it much.

Historical tonguing is much harder to learn, but it's quite versatile once it's mastered. The effect is that of a rapid legato tonguing. This is the kind of tonguing which you should use for most divisions.

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The first problem in learning historical tonguing is aspirating the “del” syllable. Practice this by holding your hand in front of your mouth while you say “di-del, de-del.” When you feel a nice little puff of air on both syllables, you’re ready to move on to your recorder. Practice the tonguing slowly on scale passages or the scale-like etudes of your choice. My personal favorite is

- ☛ Hans Ulrich Staeps (1970), edited by Gerald Burakoff. *Nine Basic Exercises for Alto Recorder*, New York, Consort Music.

Then work it into solo music, starting with short passages. It takes a while to master the trick of it (it took me a year or two!), so be patient. It’s worth the effort. As a happy bonus, that tonguing was also used in the baroque, so you’ll get lots of use out of it.

Working Out Embellishments with Pencil and Paper

The first step to learning renaissance embellishment is to work out some examples on manuscript paper.
Here are the steps you follow:

- ☛ Rule the manuscript paper into systems of at least four staves.
- ☛ On the top staff, write the unadorned melody.
- ☛ On the 2nd staff, add some graces to the melody. (In the example above, I’ve written out the graces which requires some pretty tedious arithmetic. In fact it’s much easier to play the graces than to write them down, so you might prefer to just use symbols like those I introduced earlier.)
- ☛ On the 3rd staff, write divisions on the melody.
- ☛ On the 4th staff, combine the graces of the 2nd staff with the divisions of the 3rd.
- ☛ Add more staves to work out more divisions, if you like.

Here’s an example, a coranto from *Parthenia In-Violata*:

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Coranto

Anonymous

Melody

Melody with Graces

Divisions

Divisions & Graces

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The appendices give some helpful historical examples. Ganassi gave hundreds of examples of connecting intervals with division patterns. I've included a selection of these in the first appendix. You can appropriate them directly for your divisions or, better, just

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use them for inspiration. Subsequent appendices include examples of divisions written for recorder, viol, and harpsichord that you can use as models. The last appendix gives some examples for you to complete along with some manuscript paper for your own exercises.

Once you've worked out an embellished version of a melody, the obvious next step is to prop it up on the music stand and play it next time you perform the piece. **Don't do it!** Embellishment is an extemporaneous art and you've got to liberate yourself from little black marks on the page. It you really like your embellishment, learn to play it from memory. Then you're not looking at the music and with a little luck you'll have a memory slip and make up something fresh! Then you're improvising embellishments just like they did in the 16th century.

Practical Considerations

Extemporizing embellishments is pretty scary at first. Here are some practical suggestions to help you get started:

- Start by adding a few simple graces to the melody.
- The next step is to add a few simple patterns for divisions. Start by just filling in melodic intervals, then learn a pattern or two for ascending and descending scales. Here are some examples:

filling intervals

divisions for scales

- Don't worry about producing elaborate embellishments at first. Even adding few graces can make a repetition more convincing. Start with simple stuff and the rest will come along later.

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The Appendices

The appendices are musical examples to supplement the text material. Here's a list of them:

A. Sylvestro Ganassi's *passaggi*
B. Divisions from Jakob van Eyck's *Der Fluiten-Lusthof*
C. Divisions on a ground bass by Christopher Simpson
D. Divisions from *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*
E. Some exercises in constructing divisions

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