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Style and Performance for Bowed String Instruments in French Baroque Music

Mary Cyr

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STYLE AND PERFORMANCE FOR BOWED STRING INSTRUMENTS IN FRENCH BAROQUE MUSIC

Frontispiece: Antoine Watteau, *Two Studies of a Violinist Tuning His Instrument* (1717/1718), drawing in black and red chalk, 30 cm x 21.3 cm. Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Style and Performance for Bowed String Instruments in French Baroque Music

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Abbreviations

art.	article
comp.	compiler
JVdGSA	*Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*
para.	paragraph
PRMA	*Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*
R	reprint
Rés.	Réserve
SIM	*Société internationale de musicologie*
SIMG	*Sammelbände der Internationalen Musik-Gesellschaft*

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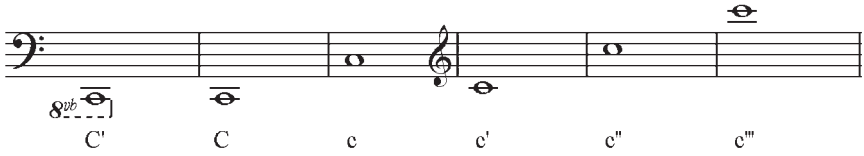
Pitch is indicated according to the following conventions:



Using these abbreviations, the normal tuning of the violin (from lowest to highest string) would be written as g–d′–a′–e″, and the tuning of the modern cello would be C–G–d–a. The seven-string *basse de viole* is tuned A′–D–G–c–e–a–d′.

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Preface

The period covered by this book, approximately 1680 to 1760, represents a time during which French artists, writers, and composers created works of great beauty and meaning. French singers, instrumentalists, and instrument builders ranked at the top of their fields and were regarded by many observers as without equal in the world. Within this time frame, the viol, violin, and cello also acquired new responsibilities as solo instruments in France, and music engraving and publishing flourished, making possible the circulation of an unprecedented number of collections of solo and ensemble music for string instruments.

Although there were many circumstances that produced outstanding musical achievements in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were also remarkable musical achievements in other parts of Europe from Henry Purcell, Dieterich Buxtehude, Antonio Vivaldi, George Frideric Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach, and many other outstanding composers. With so many towering figures and such exceptionally fine music available to us, it seems hardly surprising that French composers have received less attention than many of their contemporaries. As historically informed listening and performance have become the objective for more players today than ever before, it appears that the time is right for us to study each repertoire for its unique and distinctive characteristics. French music is certainly one of these repertoires that deserves our attention.

French Baroque music is distinctive to early music listeners, who appreciate its special timbres, formal design, ornamentation, and unusual combinations of voices, strings, woodwinds, and keyboard instruments. At the same time, listeners may not necessarily be aware that many of the characteristics that contribute to the uniqueness of French music were not always indicated in the music itself. Rather, many of these features were cultivated and preserved as conventions that were widely known and practiced. Knowing how such conventions developed and were applied in performing situations offers an enriched experience today for modern performers, because it expands the boundaries of our interpretation and communication of musical meaning.

The premise of this book is that we can explore the performance of French Baroque music through its written and unwritten conventions from the vantage point of the string players who composed and performed it. During the period 1680 to 1760, string playing was at first largely dominated by viols, but gradually after 1700 the violin family grew in popularity and finally came to dominate the musical scene after the middle of the century. Both viol- and violin-family instruments participated in chamber music and stage works during this period, but emerging solo styles of playing also influenced the way string technique developed. Studying French music for viols, violins, and cellos using historically

informed performance as our objective is a way of broadening our interpretive skills and understanding what composers tried to communicate in their music. Ultimately, such study brings us closer to discovering what we enjoy most about French Baroque music.

In Part I, a brief introduction establishes the context for studying French music and defines the common characteristics and special features of music written by French composers during the Baroque era. It also sets the focus for the present study on the period 1680 to 1760, the period during which the viol, violin, and cello developed as solo instruments in France and when significant amounts of solo music were published for these instruments. Against the historical background of French and Italian taste in music that was much debated at the time, modern interest in historical performance practice is examined with a view to understanding its goals and achievements thus far. The similarities and differences between the views of French eighteenth-century writers form a context for modern players and scholars to develop a broad view of what is meant by French style (*le goût françois*) and to articulate some of the features that lie at its core. These observations can contribute in a very positive way to our understanding of performance practice and French music.

In Part II, the two important families of bowed string instruments are investigated individually in order to outline the extent of their responsibilities and contribution to musical performances. Included in this discussion are specific conventions that apply to French music, such as the way that several sizes of violas were used for the inner parts of ensembles, how and when the *contrebasse* functioned as a foundation instrument, and the size and distribution of viol and violin sections within various types of ensembles. Part III is devoted to some of the issues that arise in performing French Baroque music, including both written and unwritten conventions of notation, especially as they apply to string playing. In Part IV, I investigate the contributions of four French Baroque composers to the solo literature for the viol, violin, and cello. These four individuals—Marin Marais, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, and Jean-Baptiste Forqueray—were all active in the period between 1680 and 1760, and their music for violin and viol holds special importance today. Studying a single composer's works and the interpretive questions they raise yields an understanding of French musical conventions not otherwise apparent when viewing historical practices in the traditional chronological manner. This approach is useful especially when the sources of a given composer's works prove challenging in one way or another, and also when composers employed musical notation in idiosyncratic ways. Among the four French composers profiled here are two virtuoso performers on the viol who also composed and published solo music for their instrument (Marais and Forqueray), a harpsichordist who was among the first to compose sonatas for the violin (Jacquet de La Guerre), and one of the first virtuoso performers and composers for the cello (Barrière). Each of these individuals contributed significantly to the development of the solo repertoire for bowed string instruments and was an outstanding performer.

In pursuing historically informed ways of performing early music, we find ourselves asking not only questions traditionally associated with historical investigation—who, what, when, where, and why—but also another significant question: "How did they do that?" It is a question that has held great interest for me, and I hope that readers of this book will find it equally fascinating.

Mary Cyr
March, 2012

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I also wish to express my gratitude to librarians and staff who were able to facilitate my research. Richard Excell, Rare Music Cataloguer at the University of Melbourne, generously contributed comments about items in the Hanson-Dyer Collection at the University of Melbourne and their relationship to Philidor, Marais, and Forqueray. David Peter Coppen, Special Collections Librarian and Archivist at the Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music (University of Rochester), assisted me in several ways and facilitated my consultation of an important Marais item at the Sibley Music Library. I also thank the many individuals who facilitated my research in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Bibliothèque de l'Arsénal, and the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra), London (the British Library), and Washington, DC (the Library of Congress). Research librarians also responded in efficient and helpful ways from Yale University, the University of North Carolina (Greensboro), McMaster University, the University of Western Ontario, and the University of Guelph. I am grateful to the libraries and museums who granted permission to reproduce pages from items in their collections and to The Broude Trust for the Publication of Musicological Editions, whose permission to include passages from scholarly editions as musical examples is much appreciated.

My work has also been facilitated by the guidance and helpful suggestions of several individuals at Ashgate Publishing. Heidi Bishop offered wise suggestions and guidance during the early stages of the book's preparation, and Laura Macy oversaw the later stages of production with great care. Lianne Sherlock also provided valuable editorial support to me, and Sara Peacock completed the task of proofreading with expertise and insight. Wendy Gillespie (Indiana University) and an anonymous reader for Ashgate kindly offered many useful suggestions for the chapter on articulation and the composer profile on the Forquerays. To all of these individuals, I express my sincere gratitude for their contributions.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of French passages are my own. Old French spelling, capitalization, and accents have been retained.

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PART I
Sources and Style in French Baroque Music

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Chapter 1
Historical Context, Musical Works, and Performance

Introduction

Music of the past occupies a central place in today's classical concert repertoire. With so many recordings and concert performances of early music on offer today, listeners may find it surprising to learn that the quest to discover how early music was performed at the time it was written is a relatively recent phenomenon. Such investigations form the core of the field of performance practice, whose origins can be traced to the early years of the twentieth century. Early efforts at reviving music of the past concentrated on investigations into the construction and use of early instruments, as well as editing and publishing early music. Significant interest on the part of scholars, performers, and listeners in music of the past has contributed in a very positive way to the expansion of the field of performance practice since the middle of the twentieth century. Today the study of performance practice encompasses a variety of different approaches, all of which are primarily concerned with the application of historically informed ways of performing music of the past.[1] Such investigations have as their goal a desire to bring performers and listeners closer to understanding and interpreting music of the past and to applying our instinct and musical judgment in ways that help us to discover how early composers intended their music to sound. Interest in performing on early instruments has fostered closer relationships between scholars and performers, leading to an exchange of research results that benefit both groups. Areas that have seen fruitful collaboration include, for example, iconography (the study of visual depictions of music-making and musical instruments), instrument construction and restoration, and the study of specific techniques associated with playing and singing early music.

The objectives for the study of performance practice have changed significantly since the mid-twentieth century. A particularly controversial discussion took place around the notion of authenticity and the extent to which it ought to be seen as a

[1] For a representative selection of both general and specific studies on performance practice from the medieval period to the early twentieth century, see the four-volume *Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice* (Aldershot, 2011) in the Bibliography. The third volume in this series, edited by Peter Walls, offers a broad selection of representative essays covering the Baroque period, and his introduction to the volume explores different approaches to investigating Baroque performance practice.

goal for studying performance practice. The 1980s mark a turning point in some ways, a time when objectives and methods were re-examined with a view to re-evaluating the importance of authenticity and whether pursuing it as a goal might actually obscure rather than enhance the objectives of studying music of the past.[2] Looking back on the authenticity debate, Stanley Sadie argued for a measured approach, one by which performers would seek authenticity not because they wish to be purists, but because they find that historically informed research and methods bring us closer to understanding a work (as a larger entity than the music itself).[3] Looked at from the music as a starting point, one might find Richard Taruskin's observation useful, that performing early music is an attempt to "re-imagine" something old, not necessarily to create it anew.[4]

One result of the authenticity debate was a recognition that artistic judgment and musicality remain core values in the study of performance practice. Since the early 1990s, the phrase "historically informed performance" (often abbreviated HIP) has gained acceptance as a term that embraces both artistic endeavor and historical research. Seeking a historically informed performance encourages scholarly investigation but recognizes the importance of combining early techniques with artistic judgment. Historically informed performance thus becomes a useful way of describing the objectives of performance practice, which are continually shifting to take into account the ongoing collaborations between scholars and performers and the ways that new research informs musical performance.

A parallel shift in objectives has taken place in the editing of musical editions. Related to the performer's quest for authenticity was the concept of an *Urtext* edition whose objective was to present a work with its "original" or intended meaning. Some performers looked to an *Urtext* for a musical score that is free of editorial intervention and therefore (theoretically, at least) as the composer may have wished to present it. This view brought the value of an editor into question, and with the arrival of facsimile editions (photographic reproductions of original sources), the argument became stronger that the editor's work had become superfluous, since increasingly performers could consult "original" sources themselves.[5] Today, scholars and performers usually support a more moderate view that would encourage performers to engage with multiple sources, both original

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[2] Several important essays that deal with questions of authenticity appear in Nicholas Kenyon, ed., *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium* (New York and Oxford, 1988). For additional views on the goals and pitfalls of authenticity, see the Bibliography to vol. 3 in the *Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice* cited in footnote 1.

[3] Stanley Sadie, "The Idea of Authenticity," in *Companion to Baroque Music*, ed. Julie Anne Sadie (New York, 1990), pp. 444–5.

[4] Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York and Oxford, 1995), Introduction, pp. 8–9.

[5] Further on the editor's role as superfluous (but nevertheless a very useful historical overview of editing techniques in early music), see Philip Brett, "Text, Context, and the Early Music Editor," in *Authenticity and Early Music*, ed. Kenyon, pp. 83–114.