



A Practical Guide To Improvising *an early Italian Toccata*



This worksheet focuses on how to improvise an Italian toccata in its early form, or *Intonation*, using examples by Andrea Gabrieli (Venice, 1593) as well as some elements from various toccatas published in Rome five years later by Claudio Merulo. These belong to the very first manifestations of the genre and I believe it is important to start here.

There are no clearcut differences between *intonationi* and *toccate*. Both were used as introductory organ pieces that set the pitch for a following sacred vocal composition. But they could just as well have been played on harpsichord independently, or as a preamble to a song or set of dances. One distinction though is that a toccata will generally be longer and more developed, sometimes containing a central section with imitative material, such as in Gabrieli's Toccata del Sesto Tono and many ones by Merulo.

HARMONIC STRUCTURES

Early Italian *intonationi* and *toccate* are a type of composition closely related to intabulations, from the Italian word *intavolatura*. This refers to a common practice, from roughly the 14th to the 17th century, to arrange vocal pieces such as madrigals, motets, psalms, etc. for either organ, harpsichord, lute, or any plucked string instrument. While respecting the harmonic structure of a piece, intervals are embellished through the use of *passaggi*, or diminutions, runs, garlands and various flourishes appearing in alternating voices. This tradition is in my opinion the point of departure for understanding the true essence of *intonationi* and *toccate*.

Therefore, I suggest to start by “unclothing” Andrea Gabrieli's *Intonatione del Primo Tono* in order to find a supposed pre-existing vocal piece. Here is one way (there can be of course many) of visualizing the “original” madrigal. I have purposely shared the 4 voices (it could very well have more) between the hands, a long-established and preferred way of controlling polyphony on the keyboard:

Ex 1A

continued next page

The harmonic path of this piece in Dorian mode is simple: it starts on the tonic, rapidly moves to the dominant A (minor) and then on to the double-dominant E (major). A cadence follows confirming the tonality A (minor). We return to D (minor) and then proceed in a short cycle of fifths down to F (major). There, a reinforcement of the tonality C (major) occurs with the bass moving in an sequence ① ⑤ ⑥ ④ ① (there is a touch of a Romanesca here) before stabilizing on D (major!) with a cadence. The composition ends with a flourish on G (minor) and a so-called plagal cadence, a common feature at the closing in this type of composition. This harmonic scheme is by no means a norm and the *intonationi/toccate* display all kinds of routes. The above-mentioned is one out of many possibilities.

COUNTERPOINT

The opening of Gabrieli's *Intonazione del Primo Tono* shows unequivocally that we are in an environment controlled by counterpoint. Indeed, all ways and forms of diminutions will be governed by contrapuntal mechanisms and so I highly recommend the close study of any pertinent and inspiring historical source on the subject. It could be for instance Girolamo Diruta's *Il Transilvano*, Venice, 1593, part two. Another important school is Christoph Bernhard's treatise *Von der Singe-Kunst oder Manier* (MS c. 1650) in which the author divides singing style in two basic fields: on one hand with simple ornaments (*cantar solo*) and on the other with improvised diminutions (*cantar passagiato* or *cantar alla lombarda*). This fashion is the one we are focusing on when attempting to improvise *intonationi/toccate*. And there is of course, in the following century, Johann Joseph Fux' *Gradus Ad Parnassum* (1725).

EXERCICE 1:

Memorize the short sequence in Ex 1. You can always extend or modify it while keeping with the general structure. Transpose it to the Secondo Tono (hypodorian - or "g minor") and alternative modes. Analyze other *intonationi/toccate*, see how they are harmonically structured and try to remember their original (vocal) blueprint. Ultimately, you will be able to extemporise your own plans.

EXERCICE 2:

Gradually add more counterpoint and rhythmic activity, using 2 and then 4 notes against 1 in any voice which offers opportunities. Here an example:

Ex 1B

Then you will want to move on 8 notes (and more!) against 1. This naturally requires examples to draw from, which is the main purpose of this introductory method. The busier and faster the *passaggi*, you will notice, the more the static “accompanying” voices tend to be grouped in either hand.

STYLISTIC ELEMENTS

● OPENING GAMBITS

Most of Gabrieli’s Intonazioni and Toccate start, as shown in the following examples, with a 4 to 5 voice texture, soprano (S) alto (A) in the right hand (RH), tenor (T) and bass (B) in the left hand (LH). This opening gambit sets the tonality firmly while displaying contrapuntal activity, usually in parallel sixths and thirds.

Consider the Intonazione del Primo Tono, with a canon in bar 2 between T and a syncopated S:

Ex 2

Or simply a rising B as in the Intonazione del Terzo Tono:

Ex 3

Or contrary movement in S and T in Intonazione del Quinto Tono:

Ex 4

Another way to start an *intonazione/toccata* is with a gradual entry of voices, such as in the Toccata del Nono Tono with the sequence T/A in bar 1, B in bar 2 and S (plus a fleeting 5th voice) in bar 3:

Ex 5A

However, this opening is actually more sophisticated than it looks, something which the two-stave Italian *tablatura* tends to somewhat mask: admire the rigorous artistry with which the voices enter with inversions in alto and bass!

Ex 5B

Claudio Merulo uses a similar outset in his *Toccata del Primo Tono*:

Ex 6

EXERCISE 2:

Practice these various possibilities (full-voiced, with imitative/canonic entries, etc.) in different modes and positions, displaying polyphonic activity in different combinations of voices, as shown in the examples above.

● DIMINUTIONS

As you have noticed, note values diminish gradually as the *Intonatione del Primo Tono* unfolds, going from an initial dotted whole note to half notes, quarter notes and now eighth notes. Note that the first bar could also present a dactyle pattern (long short short - whole note + 2 half notes, as in the *Intonatione del Terzo Tono*, a feature often found in many pavans (see example 3).

Now we start discovering the manifold and fascinating realm of diminutions, or *passaggi*, of which there are innumerable sorts and types: scale-like runs, jumps of all intervals up to an octave, broken chords, etc. When these occur in one hand, the three remaining voices, acting as an accompaniment in chordal-like fashion, are shifted to the other, as mentioned above and visible we can see in bar 3 of example 3.

Let's now analyze how Andrea Gabrieli displays these garlands throughout his *intonationi* and *toccate*. To begin with, a vital rule transpiring from these compositions is that, at each change of harmony, a dimi-

nution will always hit a consonance. Bear this in mind at all times when practicing your improvisations. If the harmony is repeated or sustained, as in the middle of both bars of example 7, the “9th eighth” (or *croma*) can very exceptionally be foreign to the harmony (*nota cattiva*). But the 17th sixteenth (*semicroma*) is invariably a consonance (*notta buona*).

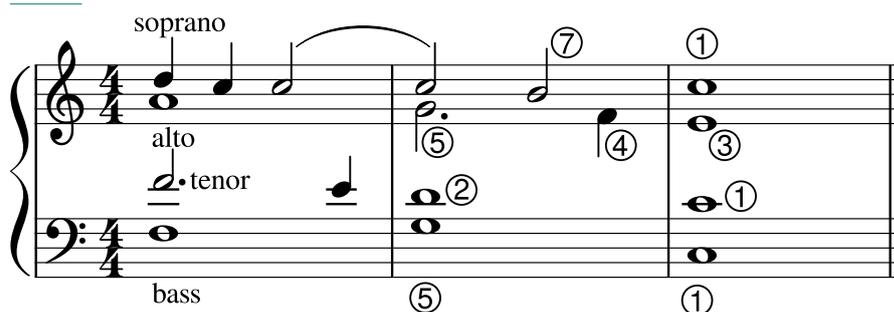
Ex 7



> 5 down or 4 up bass motion

When the bass goes down a fifth (⑤-①) or up a fourth, *clausulae* frequently occur. *Clausulae*, a Latin term for cadences, or closes, or conclusions, are an indispensable feature of music of many centuries, hinging phrases and sections one to another and oxygenating the general musical discourse. This worksheet is too short though to embark in a broad study of cadences. For deeper knowledge, I recommend reading as much as you can, from historical sources to modern research. Of the latter, I am particularly fond and admiring of Robert O. Gjerdingen’s book *Music in the Galant Style* in which there is an inspiring chapter on *clausulae* based on Johann Gottfried Walther’s *Praecepta* (1708). Principle types of (melodic) cadences are defined as follows:

Ex 8

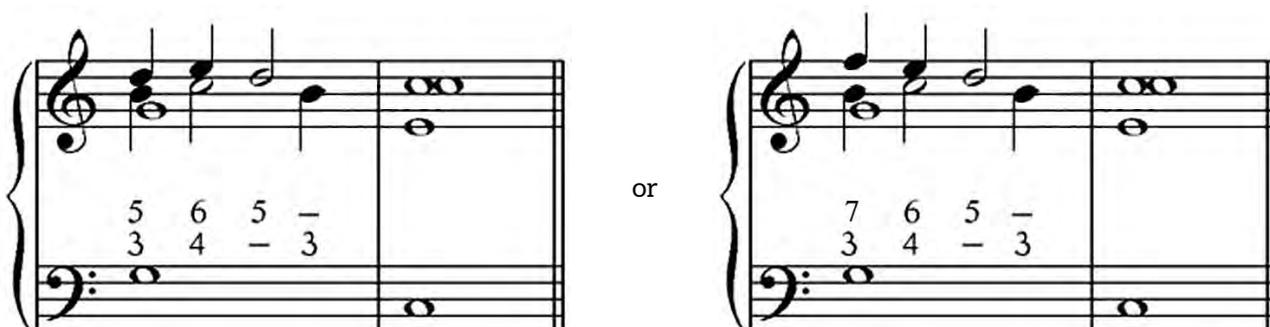


The 2 *clausulae* we are mainly concerned with here are these:

- the soprano clausula ⑦-① which is called a *clausula cantizans*
- the tenor clausula ②-① which is called a *clausula tenorizans* (circled numbers refer to steps of the tonality).

Furthermore, in the *intonationi/toccate*, cadences are often built on the so-called *cadenza doppia* which has the following structure:

Ex 9



Let's go back to example 3: we have a *cantizans* flourish in the soprano on the 3rd and 4th beat of the bar 3 on a ⑤-① bass. This is a so-called **simple cadence**. But when considering the whole bar, one detects a *cadenza doppia* flavour, even though the $\frac{5}{4}$ harmony in the middle of the bar is only hinted at. The same thing happens here:

Ex 10



An explicit *cadenza doppia*, however, appears in Claudio Merulo's Toccata seconda del Primo Tono:

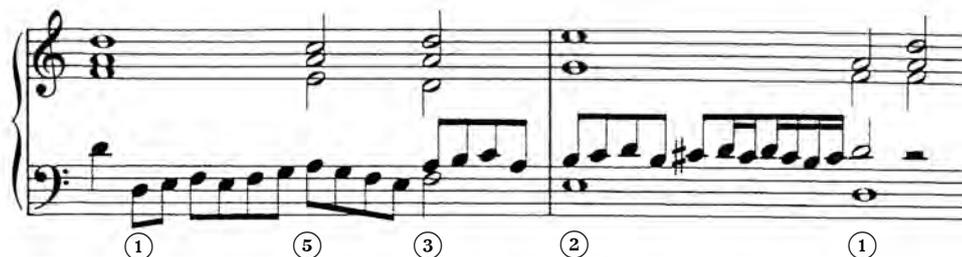
Ex 11



A cadential close can also occur in a middle voice as in the following example with a ②-① *tenorizans* close in the bass and *cantizans* flourish in the tenor:

Ex 12

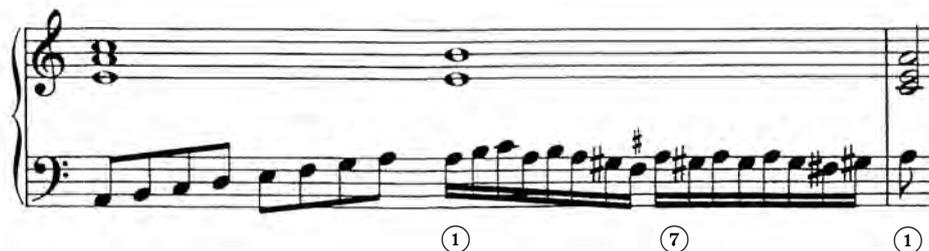
From Toccata del del Nono Tono, by Andrea Gabrieli



It can also be displayed with a *cantizans* close in the bass:

Ex 13

From Toccata del del Nono Tono, by Andrea Gabrieli



or

Ex 14

From Toccata del Ottavo Tono, by Andrea Gabrieli



EXERCICE 3:

In different modes/tonalities, practice these main species of cadences, experimenting with diminutions in *cantizans* and *tenorizans* voicings. Explore the *cadenza doppia* with flourishes in soprano, tenor and bass and develop your sense of how and when a *clausula* should occur, and sometimes be prepared.

A ⑤-① bass motion can involve *passaggi* which do not present clear cadential features, as in the following examples:

Ex 15

A -
From Intonazione
del Primo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example A, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

B -
From Intonazione
del Terzo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example B, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

C -
From Intonazione
del Quinto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example C, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

D -
From Intonazione
del Sesto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example D, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

E -
From Toccata del
Sesto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example E, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

F -
From Toccata del
del Ottavo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Musical score for Example F, showing a bass line with a 5-1 motion and a treble line with a melodic line.

G -
From Toccata del
Ottavo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Ex 15 G deserves special attention: we see how, in a way, the busier (madder!) the diminution is (here 4 successive rising motives), the easier you can get away with it, providing the complete flourish resolves smoothly to a consonance at the change of harmony.

> 5 up or 4 down bass motion

When the bass goes down a fourth or up a fifth (①-⑤) the following diminutions come about often in Gabrieli's *intonationi/toccate*:

Ex 16

A -
From Intonazione
del Primo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



B -
From Intonazione
del Settimo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



C -
From Intonazione
del Ottavo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



D -
From Toccata del
Sesto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



E -
From Toccata del
Nono Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



EXERCISE 4:

Practice the sequence ①-④-①-⑤-① in various modes, first in simple chords (or madrigal form) with B and T in the RH, S and A in the RH (see Ex 1a and 1b). After a while, shift to ATB in the LH/ S in the RH, then B in the LH/ SAT in the RH. Then try to gradually weave in diminutions by Gabrieli, Merulo or any other master you admire. Memorize as many as you can and try and develop your own. Add soprano *clausulae*.

> Down or up 3

A few examples of diminutions upon a bass moving down or upwards in thirds:

Ex 17

A -
From Intonazione
del Quinto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



B -
From Toccata Nona del Quarto Tono,
by Claudio Merulo



> Down or up 1

A few examples of diminutions upon a bass moving down or up stepwise:

Ex 18

A -
From Intonazione
del Terzo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



B -
From Toccata del
Nono Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



C -
From Toccata del Nono Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



Observe the *cantizans* close in the bass in the first bar and the ⑤-④-③-②-① progression of the tenor starting in the middle of bar 2. This progression is accompanied by a soprano a 6th higher - a typical figure called *gymel* - and, in the third bar, note a ⑦-① *passaggio* on a simple cadence, with a preceding suspension. Three inspiring bars indeed!

EXERCISE 5:

Same mission as in Ex 4 but on a ①-④-①-⑤-③-②-① bass motion, with ⑤-①, ②-① and ⑦-① *clausulae*.

● RH & LH IMITATION

Ex 19

A -
From Intonazione
del Quinto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



B -
From Toccata del
Quinto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



C -
From Toccata Ottava del Quarto Tono,
by Claudio Merulo



● ALLA BASTARDA

Alla bastarda passage-work is when one picks out and diminishes in alternation fragments of different vocal parts of a madrigal, motet, psalm or any vocal piece. Typically, a flourish will start in one voice, move to another and maybe end in a third one. Consider these specific examples in the *intonationi/toccate*:

Ex 20

From Intonazione
del Primo Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



The climbing B turns into S.



The reverse!

C -
From Toccata Quinta del Secondo Tono,
by Claudio Merulo



In this beautiful passage, the transition from B is more gradual, gliding through T, A and ending in S.

EXERCICE 6: In different modes, integrate as many of the above-mentioned ideas in your toccatas: bass motions of various intervals, RH/LH imitation, *bastarda* voicings. Always practice in a tempo or pulse as this music is fairly measured. Ultimately, a solid tactus will give your improvisations assurance and aplomb.

● FUGAL CENTRAL SECTIONS

Some toccatas by Gabrieli, Merulo and other masters include a central fugal section. If you are in the mood for some contrapuntal improvisation, try to weave such a passage in the heart of your toccata. This is of course not easy and takes time, patience and effort to learn to control. You may want to first write out your fugal and imitative sections: it is a healthy and rewarding exercise. Through this, and with time, you will notice that improvising them will get easier. Again, these imitative passages are not an obligation and your toccata can perfectly survive without.

Ex 21

A - From Toccata del Quinto Tono,
by Andrea Gabrieli



SATB exposition and stretto writing





Here an ABST exposition, with an “inversed” T.

EXERCISE 7: On very simple and straightforward subjects, practise different expositions in 4 voices: SATB / BTAS / ASTB/ etc...Countersubjects must also remain uncomplicated. After the exposition, you can bring one or two more entries and then hook up with customary toccata passage-work. I recommend daily and patient exercise, with the disposition of BT in the LH and SA in the RH (see Ex 1a & 1b).

● VARIOUS LAYOUTS AND PATTERNS OF INTEREST

Finally, a few of my favorite tournures:

Ex 22

From Toccata del Nono Tono, by Andrea Gabrieli



In this stunningly diverse passage, we first see a roller-coaster LH run in 16ths, augmenting to 8ths, and moving on to an elegant contrapuntal section. Note the waviness of voices and the *mi contra fa* (so-called English) cadence with a *cantizans* close in the A. Then comes a new motive in the S, promptly imitated in the T, and in the next bar a beautiful *tenorizans* cadence in the B.

Ex 23

From Toccata Prima del Primo Tono, by Claudio Merulo



An astonishingly vocal and linear section. S, A and B move by step only. Note the elegance of ornamentation in the T and the passing 7th in the A before the middle of bar 2.

Ex 24

From Toccata Prima del Primo Tono, by Claudio Merulo



The image shows two systems of a musical score for a toccata. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff features a series of chords and ornaments, including a descending faux-bourdon. The lower staff has a bass line with some ornaments and a deceptive cadence. The second system also has two staves, with the upper staff showing a descending parallel third and the lower staff featuring a rising passage-work in the S. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

Observe the descending faux-bourdon chords, the written-out ornaments (*tremoletti*), a deceptive cadence and descending parallel thirds with simultaneous rising passage-work in S.

Ex 25

From Toccata Terza del Secondo Tono, by Claudio Merulo



The image shows a single system of a musical score for a toccata. It consists of two staves. The upper staff has a melody with various ornaments and a deceptive cadence. The lower staff has a bass line with a rising passage-work in the S. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

A tasteful display of 3 to 4 part polyphony with particularly active inner voices.

Ex 26

From Toccata Quinta del Secondo Tono, by Claudio Merulo



The image shows a single system of a musical score for a toccata. It consists of two staves. The upper staff has a melody with various ornaments and a deceptive cadence. The lower staff has a bass line with a rising passage-work in the S. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

An alluring *Romanesca* pattern with bass figuration. Later a 4# chord on the first beat of bar 3: this feature of style development will occur more often as we move on through the early 16th century.

Countless other examples could be added! For sure, I recommend studying as many early toccatas and intonazioni by A. Gabrieli and his entourage: Merulo, Padovano, Picchi, Luzzaschi, Quagliati. There is one outstanding toccata by Merula.

Exquisite toccatas in Venetian style by non-Italian masters can be found in Sweelinck's oeuvre and in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (often called *praeludium*.) Developing one's capacity to improvise diminutions will also be enhanced by the study of historic sources written for that very purpose.

A few suggestions:

HISTORIC SOURCES

- Diego Ortiz: *Tratado de glosas*, 1553
- Juan Bermudo: *Declaración de instrumentos musicales*, 1549-1555
- G. C. Maffei: *Delle lettere*, 1562
- Tomás de Santa Maria: *Arte de tañer fantasia*, 1565
- Giovanni Battista Bovicelli: *Regole, Passagi di Musica, Madrigali et Motetti passaggiati*, 1594

MODERN STUDIES

- Pascale Boquet et Gérard Rebour: *50 standards renaissances et baroques*, Fuzeau, 2006
- Martin Erhard, *Improvisation mit Ostinatobässen aus dem 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert*, Walhall, 2011

Hopefully this short method on the early Italian toccata will help and inspire you in developing your improvisations. It is a vital initial step before moving on to the more elaborate and manneristic language of the following generation: Frescobaldi, Froberger and Pasquini.

But that will be for another worksheet...

Patrick Ayrton

March 2016

Many thanks to Gaël Liardon for his judicious advice and suggestions.

