Giovanni Bassano

Motetti, madrigali et canzone francese

(1591)

Ricercate Passaggi et Cadentie

(1585)

Translated by Sion M. Honea
Translator’s Preface

Giovanni Bassano’s two books on the diminution technique offer little in the way of instructional text, and the musical portions are themselves also rather slight compared to most of the other diminution methods. Their greatest contribution may perhaps be seen as together documenting many of the genres in which diminutions were considered appropriate: motets, madrigals, French canzonas, and ricercate, if the rather vague latter one can be considered a distinct genre. The ricercata, if considered a genre in the form it appears here, does at least document that the technique was applied to solo compositions of a sort.

Howard Mayer Brown in his *Embellishing 16th-Century Music* cites both volumes but notes that the *Motetti, madrigali et canzoni francese* book was lost in World War II. Fortunately there survives a manuscript copy by Friedrich Chrysander (ca. 1890) in the collection of the Hamburg Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek. This is available digitally online through the IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library, though the image, at least as I receive it, is small and with poor contrast. Fortunately Chrysander transcribed all the front matter in an italic script similar, presumably, to the original, though there appear to be some personal prefatory notes by him in the older German script, which I have never been able to devote enough time to in order to learn. Unfortunately, despite the careful copying and italic script, I still find illegible some words in the author’s address to the reader.

A difficulty arises in Bassano’s texts as to how he addresses his readers, formally in the third person verbs and pronouns. The modern use of capitalization had not become the standard means of distinguishing this in print. There are occasions when the third plural may be “you,” but it could sometimes also be a reference to his subject matter.

Bassano’s book *Ricercate*, etc. is effectively in four parts: ricercate, passaggi, cadences, and diminished forms of the soprano part of a Cipriano de Rore madrigal. The ricercate are in the nature of extended elaborations that seem to be based on stated motives, whose overall purpose is to acquaint the student with typical formulas in extended use, but I do not find the organization intuitive. The passaggio and cadence sections proceed in the familiar way by presenting the interval or cadential formula to be varied, followed by a succession of diminution variants. The diminished madrigal soprano, the fourth part, presents only the diminution, not the original.

As mentioned, Bassano’s instructional contributions are arguably negligible to our understanding of the diminution technique, but it is my purpose here in this series of translations to be utterly comprehensive in the translation of every text on the subject that I have been able to identify.

Addendum to Revision

I would like to thank Mr. Andrew Robinson for making possible this revision of Bassano’s remarks to the reader for the *Motetti, madrigali et canzoni francese* (1591). He called my attention to an obvious mistranslation, for which I have no excuse, as well as providing better readings of the original text in some instances. These together with his other observations and questions caused me to rethink portions of my translation, resulting in what I believe is an improved reading. Though not all problems are solved, any persisting errors are, of course, owing solely to me.
Ricercate Passaggi et Cadentie (1585)

Giovanni Bassano to the Reader

Desirous, as much as I am able, to be of benefit to excellent musicians who delight in making diminutions, either by the simple voice or with instruments—either by one or the other means—I wanted to share this my work with you. From these you will see, by the guide of these my little ricercari, how you may be able to practice in diminutions with any wind instrument or with the viol. Having diminished diverse ways, both passaggi and cadences, which can be made use of such as on endings (termini), which I describe in that way that seems better for them, proportioning the value of the diminution notes to the entire note that you want to diminish in such way as will prove more convenient for you, diminishing by the same rule also any composition entirely such as I have demonstrated by the example of the madrigal at the end of this work. Although many other labors made by my betters on the subject of diminutions ought perhaps to restrain me from publishing this my work, I did not want to deny beginners this, that this manner of diminishing seems to have discovered, so that everyone may know how. Since it was always dear to me and is more dear now than ever to receive fruit from the learned compositions of others, thus it delights me greatly to assist you in the way as much as I can, to those who delight in learning.

This thirty-second-note Û you will understand in this work of mine is quadruple, that is with thirty-two to the value of a whole-note.

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1 This translation was made from a poor photocopy apparently itself made from a microform of some type and is often indistinct, barely legible and even illegible in places.
2 Bassano uses the formal forms of address, which are the third person verbs and pronouns. Since he does not employ the modern practice of capitalizing the affected words, this creates a degree of confusion as to when he is addressing his reader and when he is referring to his subject matter.
3 Between his two books Bassano uses the terms ricercare and ricercate apparently indiscriminately. Musicians are, of course, familiar with the ricercare, a variant of which is ricercata according to Harvard Dictionary of Music, 4th ed. I am not entirely satisfied that this resolves the issue as the terms were used in the sixteenth century. My sense is that ricercata is used both as a genre term = ricercare and more loosely as a technical term something like “embellishment;” the modern Italian ricercato does possess the sense of “refined.” Further, the basic meaning of the verb ricercare is “search for (again).” To my mind the term is used also, in addition to the genre and embellishment technique, to mean something like a “study” or “etude.” This seems closest to what Bassano actually presents in the book. Finally, Brossard, Dictionaire de Musique (3rd ed. 1708) s.v. “ricercata” says “Veut dire, recherché. C’est un espeece de Prelude ou de fantaisie qu’on joue sur l’Orgue . . . Cela se fait ordinairement sur le champ & sans preparation, & par consequent cela demande beaucoup d’habileté.”
4 This is a conjecture for an illegible passage, possibly diminuito diversi modi.
5 This translation is a conjecture for a passage I find obscure. Bassano does provide a section on cadence formulas.
6 This is a vestige of mensural notation, in which the thirty-second-note could be taken in triple subdivision with twenty-four to the whole-note or in double subdivision with thirty-two to the whole-note.
This my present work in having diminished the present musical compositions was not made to the end of more glory but in order to give aid to those who might be able with easier study to have some help from it. Further, I have divided this work in three parts for four, five and six voices, advising that you make use not only of those motets or madrigals with words diminished for the single gorgia voice, but also you will be able to make use of them with what instrument pleases you, such as make diminutions without words. There are found some madrigals in four, five and six voices not only with the bass diminished, but sometimes leaving out the bass [voice]. The tenor sings, provided it is singable by only one voice, taking care always to have the bass of the song played as the foundation of the music. Songs diminished in this way you will be able to use in ensemble by singing that voice alone among other instruments or a keyboard instrument alone with the bass played and a single voice. In regard to other diminished motets, the soprano and bass, as these two parts are singing together, yield place to each other in the diminutions. Enjoy, then, with pleasure, with that sincere spirit with which I offer it to you, while I am preparing my other new works for you remember me and farewell.

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7 The point of the rather strange mention of “with words” is that he is going to advise the substitution of instruments for some voices.
8 This is a reference to the use of throat articulation.
9 As in the previous preface, Bassano makes use of the formal third person forms for “you.”
10 Bassano’s text becomes confusing from this point, but it must be understood that he describes how performance with instrumental substitutes is to be accomplished.
11 Bassano’s emphasis on the bass is unusual. The other writers on the subject agree that the bass should only rarely indulge in diminution.
12 That is, the bass as a sung part is omitted but is replaced by instrumental performance as he subsequently describes.
13 It thus converts the bass voice into a kind of basso continuo, which is consistent with this kind of substitution performance of the time.
14 The sentence is somewhat obscure. The phrase *si danno loco*. *Cambridge Italian Dictionary* recognizes a specific use of *darsi* as reciprocal, as in this case. The phrase seems to describe that the two voices alternate in performing diminutions, which is consistent with the recommendation of other authors.