

Riccardo Rognoni

# Passaggi

per potersi esercitare nel  
diminuire

(1592)

Translated by Sion M. Honea

## Translator's Preface

The rather brief introductory material to the two parts of Riccardo Rognoni's diminution method are disproportionately informative. The information he gives is both in general terms of what makes diminutions, voice and instruments, and where, and also in specific issues of performance practice. He provides welcome restatements of many of the basics, such as emphasizing that diminutions be small and good rather than extravagant and "less so." Even the earliest beginning band student can profit from his clear statement that you need to pat your foot in order to keep track of the rhythm because when your mind is occupied with so many other things about the music it can often go astray. His specific remarks on tonguing wind instruments add another authoritative statement to those of Dalla Casa and his own son Francesco, even though all three differ somewhat from the others. The most celebrated part of Rognoni's text is probably his remarks on bowing, celebrated, that is, for being confusing to modern players. Bruce Dickey discusses them at length in the preface to his facsimile edition of the text (Forni, 2007). He suggests a possible solution but concludes that the matter is actually yet to receive definitive resolution. The purpose of this translation, as with all translations in this series, is to make an English text more widely available to those who concern themselves with the expanding interests of performance practice.

## The Author to the Excellent Readers

If the composer's opportunity had conformed to the desire that I have always had to be of service to the good public, because I am most obliged on account of patriotic duty and the great kindness of the citizens, then assuredly this my labor would not have come forth so tardily. But at least my preoccupations have not deprived me of this benefit, that in reviewing more times I had not improved upon it. This is why it comes forth, if not entirely, at least in part conforming to that idea that I had conceived from the beginning.

This will be the first evidence of my good will, which I have always had (would that my powers, however small, that God as so benevolently bestowed on me, had even been equal to serving others) and together will be a symbol of the love that I bear for the one who delights in this ability, and so also useful for every kind of person who either takes pleasure in music, either with the natural voice alone, or has also accompanied it with the harmony of instruments. In this has been my purpose, of giving them certain rules, either passaggi of diminutions, whether they make them with the voice alone or with an instrument. Truly, the one who does not have a voice facile for diminution, either by nature or by practice, which we call gorgia, will experience some difficulty.<sup>1</sup> But certainly, nothing less will come from it than he will acquire some good style or grace in singing. Where someone has this gift of gorgia he will find diverse passaggi, some of those proper for the voice and others for instrument solo, because often the voice certainly cannot achieve the diminution executed by an instrument with such velocity and so easily.<sup>2</sup> In regard to the instruments, then, they have this in common, that when they are played dexterously so that the sound does not issue mostly harsh and confused, which happens to the one who cares more for

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<sup>1</sup> Maffei says that there is a natural disposition/ability (hence *disposizione*) in some, but that the technique can also be cultivated in most, at least to some degree.

<sup>2</sup> The greater agility in instruments is an observation common in the authors; however, instruments do not possess the subtle quality of the voice in throat articulation, which certain types of tonguing seek to imitate.

showing off by playing a great mass of difficult things, [rather] than [by playing] few and well so as to please. But one will easily avoid this abuse who, instead of the one who plays along without example, will study this first part and make himself confident, because labor will always be in vain that has not first taken care to make the *ricercate*<sup>3</sup> distinct and clear. I do not exceed six or eight notated lines for the convenience of the book,<sup>4</sup> but the player, however, does not have to refrain because all those steps are not used for runs that the nature of the instrument renders possible. I have notated two clefs in each place so that each player can select that part that best pleases, whether soprano or alto or tenor or bass, to which he easily will accommodate by raising or lowering the instrument.<sup>5</sup> Finally, may it please Our Lord that neither may this Rule be in vain for me<sup>6</sup> nor this exercise for those, and may He give us spirit for greater things.

String instruments being difficult in downbow (*tirare*) or upbow (*pontar*) in beginning to play, one ought always to draw the bow down (*tirar*) if he plays the viola da gamba and also the viola da brazzi [*sic*]. However, short groppetti are made upbow (*pontar*) or downbow (*tirar*) as one pleases, and also replacing the bow when one finds quarter-notes in the middle of eighth-notes or eighth-notes in the middle of quarter-notes, or making two notes in one bow, because it is not possible to make a diminution that is long if the bow does not go correctly, because it is understood that in making a long diminution the viola da gamba bow goes upbow (*pontar*) on

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<sup>3</sup> Musicians are, of course, familiar with the *ricercare*, a variant of which is *ricercata* according to *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> 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),” and so, to my mind, the term is used also, in addition to the genre and embellishment technique, to mean something like a “study” or “etude.” Finally, Brossard, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1708) s.v. “*ricercata*” says “*Veut dire, recherché. C’est un espece 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.*”

<sup>4</sup> That is in order to facilitate printing. Unlike others, such as Diruta only a year later (1593), Rognoni uses a standard five-line staff, so he must be including ledger lines.

<sup>5</sup> That is, the player will transpose so that the passage lies in the range appropriate for the specific instrument.

<sup>6</sup> In other words, that his work in writing the book may not be in vain.

eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes and the violine da brazze [*sic*] downbow (*tirar*) on eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes because the bow on all has to have [abide by] its rule.

Wind instruments have different kinds of tonguing and there are two of them that are used up to the diminution notes of eighth-notes.<sup>7</sup> The first is this: te te te te. The second is de de de de, which is gentler. For eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes and thirtysecond-notes tonguing differs; however, almost all the good players whom I have heard [use] this for gentlest—ler ler ler ler, and the second—der der der der, and this third—ter ler ter ler ter. The last is a little more crude. Above all one ought not omit that the note that the tongue gives the strike the finger also coordinates with it, and [that you should] make a good instrument [sound].

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<sup>7</sup> It is well worthwhile to compare this statement on tonguing with those of Dalla Casa and Rognoni's son, Francesco in this translation series. There are significant differences. Bruce Dickey, in the preface to the modern edition of Rognoni's work (Forni, 2007), explains the difference between the ler ler ler ler, etc that appears here and the lere lere lere that appears elsewhere by the suggestion that the former is more nearly what actually happens in the act of tonguing.

## The Author to the Excellent Readers

### (Part 2)

You see,<sup>8</sup> then, in the first part a collection of ricercate for instrumental use, which one can reasonably say is the seasoning of the sound and the ornament of music, such that without this variety of passaggi the frequent repetitions even of this, as of every other thing, are displeasing to the ear. Since, if sometimes in diminutions there will sometimes happen often the same cadences, you will need<sup>9</sup> to become practiced in this diversity of diminutions and passaggi, which I have printed for this purpose, and also you may accompany yourselves differently with your ricercate. Let it not, then, seem to anyone a strange event sometimes [to find] two fifths or two octaves together, because such diversity necessarily introduces some of them. It is good, however, to avoid them as much as possible, and anyone will do it easily with attention to the time and measure, because to tell the truth, however swift, skillful and distinct the ricercata may be, if perchance it does not conclude in tempo, all its elegance is ruined.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, everyone would be advised to measure them by tapping the foot, because the mind intent on other duties, if it is burdened with this also, very often deceives. Where even without this guide one often notices that, transported by the speed of the diminution, in the end one finds oneself lost. This is as much as I wanted to advise you in order to complete this my labor, which if it does not succeed in conforming to your expectation and my desire, I am certain at least that he gives enough who gives what he can.

Farewell!

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<sup>8</sup> "*Eccovi*" imparts a greater immediacy to this address to the reader, which Rognoni further enhances through formal address in third person verbs and pronouns.

<sup>9</sup> This is an example of third plural as formal address for "you."

<sup>10</sup> Strict attention to time and measure is a commonplace in the literature.