

Improvising, according to treatises

Numerous 16th- and 17th-century treatises²⁷, intended for the voice as well as for instruments, give rules and especially examples of how to ‘diminish’ or make *passagi* on the various ascending and descending intervals, on small groups of notes and on cadences. They also show how this can be applied to the repertoire (‘*tenores italianos*’ in Diego Ortiz, songs, *motets*, *madrigals*, etc).

Studying these treatises, practicing the numerous formulas they suggest and applying them in actual situations will enable musicians to build a pool of musical and instrumental patterns and develop the ability to spontaneously diminish a simple tune or improvise on a harmonic base.

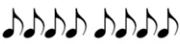

For example, applying divisions and cadential formulas inspired by Diego Ortiz (1553) to the first phrase of the *Aria di Firenze* (upper staff) gives the following:



Taking more elaborate solutions from the writings of Ricardo Rognoni (1592), one might obtain, among other possibilities:



Silvestro Ganassi, for whom ‘*diminishing is nothing more than varying a text or phrase which, in its essence, proves to be clear and simple*’, proposes the following basic classification:

- simple division: all the notes of the division are of identical length; e.g.: 
- compound division: using different lengths; e.g.: 

Aurelio Virgiliano advises proceeding by conjunct motion ‘*as much as possible*’. According to Diego Ortiz, ‘*the most perfect way*’ to *glosar* is that in which ‘*the last note of the glosa is the same as the one which was glosada [diminished]*’²⁸:



Bassano, Ganassi and Virgiliano, among others, also seem to adhere to this rule, even in fairly extravagant solutions:



²⁷ See the list of treatises consulted p. 136.
²⁸ The absence of clef in these examples is in keeping with the original, which does not set any specific pitch.

1 - Passamezzo Antico

Europe, 16th & 17th c.

♩ ≈ 60

suggested melody

Ortiz develops his whole *Recercada Quinta* over these four bars.

variant by Ortiz
(*Recercada Primera*):

Transposition

1a - Version with doubled bars

♩ ≈ 60

Leroy

etc II

This form with doubled bars is also found in Gardane (1551), Philips (1592), Byrd (c.1600), Picchi (1621)...

1b - Version quoting the Romanesca

♩ ≈ 60

suggested melody

[Romanesca - cf p. 38]

Transposition

1c - Version "with intermediate dominant" (late 16th, 17th c.)

♩ ≈ 60

Ossia:

Analysis of two well-known 'standards'

The examples below, taken from the two most famous ostinato basses, *Passamezzo Antico* for the Renaissance and the *Folies* for the Baroque era, show more precisely the diversity of ideas, techniques and musical styles in use at the time.

1 - Passamezzo Antico

These numerous examples of *passamezzi*, written down between c.1530 and 1620³⁶, reveal the wide diversity of writing styles corresponding to different periods, instrumental sources and sometimes also national origins. We have grouped them according to melodic or rhythmic features in order to give the reader an overview of the possible divisions and variations applicable to this typical 16th century³⁷ bass (cf. Standard 1, p. 36).

1. Divisions in conjunct motion:

Ex. 1a, *Division Flute*



Ex. 1b, *Phalèse*



Ex. 1c, *Robinson*



Ex. 1d, *Morlaye* (the large leap of a 10th in bar 2 allows us to remain within the range of the instrument)



³⁶ In other words, as much as from Brahms to Boulez!

³⁷ For greater reading clarity, we have transposed the lute pieces into D and those for vihuela into G.