The Role of the Theorbo in the Music of Restoration England

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Image of a 12-course lute player, cited in Sayce, “Continuo Lutes in 17th and 18th-Century England”.

The theorbo was a ubiquitous continuo instrument in Restoration England. It was a common instrument in the accompaniment of solo songs: John Playford’s song books specified ‘Theorbo-Lute, or Bass-Viol’ until 1687, at which point they added Harpsichord as a possibility.[1] In the theater, the theorbo and guitar were the preferred instruments to accompany songs and dialogues, with harpsichords as a secondary option; there were up to two theorbos and harpsichords each in the Restoration theater.[2] One or two theorbos were used to accompany symphony anthems, in addition to organ and one-to-a-part strings.[3] Evidently, the theorbo was used in musical performances in England at the theater, the church, and in the home.

What was the instrument that is referred to as a theorbo in Restoration England? Linda Sayce argues that the theorbo in England for much of the 17th century was a 12-course lute tuned in renaissance G tuning, rather than the 14-course re-entrant theorbos used in Italy or France. Several surviving manuscripts of music with tablature theorbo accompaniment or chord tables (“Stops upon the theorbo”), such as by John Walsh, indicate this, and high and chromatic theorbo parts by William Lawes also suggest a non-reentrant theorbo. Additionally, title pages calling for theorbo and depicting 12-course lutes. Thomas Mace argued for the inclusion of a 13th string, indicating that 12 courses were the norm at his time,[4] and otherwise confirms the thesis that the theorbo was in essence a renaissance lute, writing:

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[1] Peter Holman, *Henry Purcell* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.s 36, 45.

[2] Judith Milhous and Curtis Price, “Harpsichords in the London Theatres, 1697-1715,” *Early Music* 18 (February 1990): p. 39; Peter Holman, “Purcell’s Orchestra,” *The Musical Times* 137, no. 1835 (January 1996): 23.

[3] Peter Holman, “Purcell’s Orchestra,” *The Musical Times* 137, no. 1835 (January 1996): 20.

[4] Linda Sayce, “Continuo Lutes in 17th and 18th-Century England,” *Early Music* 23, no. 4 (November 1995): 666–84.

> The *Theorboe*, is no other, than *That* which we call'd *the Old English Lute*; and is an *Instrument* of so much *Excellency*, and *Worth*, *and of so Great Good Use*, That in despite of all *Fickleness*, and *Novelty*, It is still made use of, in the *Best Performances in Musick*, (*Namely*, *Vocal Musick*.)[5]

In other words, the theorbo is the renaissance lute, now used to accompany. The term theorbo thus served to distinguish the lute in its continuo-role from its solo playing, where it was tuned in the various *accords nouveaux* that were fashionable in the second half of the century.

How was theorbo accompaniment played?

1. Organ books

One category of evidence we have is from the organ books: Rebecca Herrisone analyzes these to reveal insights into how organists realized continuo in sacred music. Organists read from scores, which often consisted of only the outer two voices. Further material was included in four cases:

1. imitative entries were always written out,
2. parallel thirds or sixths were often included,
3. additional voices or figures were added when they strayed from what might have been naturally expected given the harmonic rules, and
4. 4. inner parts were included when an outer part held a single note for a bar or longer.[6]

Vocal parts were often simplified or transposed by an octave for ease of the organist's playing.[7]

In realizations, organists always doubled written parts, with occasional melodic simplification, and would fill in further parts to maintain a consistent 3- or 4-voice texture; Blow's organ scores never include more than 4 voices, and he advocates using 4-5 voiced realizations.[8] Herrisone writes that "independent material [i.e. figures and voices that do not double the existent parts] in vocal sections is never distinguished from ordinary doublings on the stave", and that "there seems little point in an arranger going to the trouble of writing new material for the organ part if he did not intend it to be played."[9] Thus, it is likely that the organists played everything that was on the page, adding contrapuntal voices so as to maintain a texture. Herrisone speculates that

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[5] Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument* (London: John Carr, 1676), 207.

[6] Rebecca Herrisone, "To Fill, Forbear, or Adorne": The Organ Accompaniment of Restoration Sacred Music (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22-29.

[7] Ibid, 48, 50.

[8] Ibid, 44-45.

[9] Ibid, 54.

organists did not make a big difference in texture between genres, instead primarily creating stylistic distinctions between more imitative and more homophonic music; imitative music, she argues, was more contrapuntal than homophonic music, and doubled voices more strictly.[10]

Herrisone points out that many non-English writers seem to advocate an accompaniment style heavy in doublings and , and not just in sacred music. Score reading is advocated by Banchieri (1609), Diruta (1609), and Schütz (1625) Doubling a simplified version of the vocal line is advocated by Cima (1610), Pietro Lappi (1608), Girolamo Giacobbi (1609), Penna (1672), Bartolomeo (1677), and Nicolò Pasquali (1757). Doubling fugal entries is advocated by Michael Praetorius (1619), Alessandro Poglietti (1676), Georg Muffat (1682), Heinichen (1725) and Giuseppe Paolucci (1766), as well as in Tonelli's realizations of Corelli sonatas.[11] Evidently, a polyphonic conception was important to keyboard accompaniment across Europe throughout the long 17th century.

Roger North writes that "A score is certainly the best thro base part, … [B]ut for the sake of Scollars, & low performers the figures as I said are usefull."[12] This seems to express disdain for the theorboists, who, unlike organists, play from a figured or unfigured bass part.[13] North also writes,

> [A]ltho a man may attain the art to strike the accords true to a thro-base prescribed him, according as it is figured, yet he may not pretend to be master of his part, without being a master of Composition In generall; ffor there is occasion of so much management In the manner of play, sometimes striking onely the accords, sometimes arpeggiando, sometimes touching the air, and perpetually observing the emphatick places, to fill, forbear, or adorne, with a just favour, that [one who is only] a thro-base master, & not an ayerist, is but an abcedarian.[14]

In other words, knowing simply which chords to play is not sufficient: thorough-bass players must know how to shift their manner of play: sometimes just pluck, sometimes arpeggiate, sometimes play the melody ("touching the air"), adorning/filling the more emphatic places. And to make these decisions, the thorough-bass player must know about composition. But knowing about composition is different from reading from a score; one is about knowing about music in general, while the other is about knowing about the single piece in particular. I bring up these quotes from North to hint at the variety of ways one might play continuo: it doesn't only need to be a strict chorale-style

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[10] Herrisone, "To Fill, Forbear, or Adorne", 61.

[11] Ibid, 117-120.

[12] Quoted in Herrisone, "To Fill, Forbear, or Adorne", 9-10.

[13] Holman, *Henry Purcell*, 62.

[14] Quoted in Herrisone, "To Fill, Forbear, or Adorne", 9.

realization, and this variety of arpeggiating, striking, and adorning may have been the theorbo's strength. The organist's playing style, however, is still informative; it indicates the existence of a horizontal musical conception in the accompaniment.

2. Figured-bass treatises

I will next discuss two thorough-bass treatises by prominent composers of the Restoration: Matthew Locke and John Blow.

a) Matthew Locke, *Melothesia*

Locke's *Melothesia*,[15] published in 1673, includes "general rules for playing upon a continued-bass" as a prelude to a collection of keyboard pieces. The advertisement advises that the rules presented in the book "equally fit the *Theorbo, Arch-Lute, Harp*" as they do keyboard instruments. Before the rules are mentioned, intervals' sizes are explained, as is the meaning of particular figures. I've paraphrased Locke's ten rules as follows:

1. Play octaves, thirds, fifths, and their compounds unless a rule or figure tells otherwise, staying within the mode indicated; no parallel fifths or octaves in outer voices; don't play one note flat and another sharp at the same time.
2. On bass notes a half step below, a major third above, and a major sixth above the tonic (*Tone*), play a minor sixth, except if the cadence rule tells otherwise.
3. Cadences generally have fourth ascent or fifth descent; one voice should go 4-3 or 3-4-3 over the bass, always with a sharp 3rd; in the 3-4-3 case, another voice should go 7-6-5 or 6-5; generally, if the bass rises a fourth or descends a fifth, it should have a sharp third.
4. If the figure is 7-6, the sixth is major; major third if the bass descends a half step, minor 3rd if the bass descends a whole step.
5. Don't play a third with 4 in the figure, a fifth with 6 in the figure, or a sixth with 7 in the figure.
6. On a scalar passage, ascend 5-6, and descend 6-5 or 7-6 according to your ear, and playing according to the key you're going to.
7. When the bass moves by thirds (i.e. up a third, down a step or down a third, up a step), every other note (i.e. the lower third) gets a sixth.
8. When the bass moves fast, play a chord only on big beats or play thirds and tenths; on the theorbo etc. (!), just play single notes.
9. Don't voice a chord too low; if the bass is below C, go an octave up for the chord.

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[15] Matthew Locke, *Melothesia* (London: John Carr, 1673). Included in Arnold, *The Art of Accompaniment*; also available on IMSLP.

10. Contrary motion is a good way for the beginner to avoid parallels.

To summarize, the first three rules concern general principles of harmony and counterpoint, rules 4 and 5 concern the realization of specific figures, rules 6 and 7 concern the harmonization of specific bass motions, and the last three rules are about style. Perhaps the rules could be categorized differently than I have categorized them, but it seems that these are the general categories Locke is seeking to cover. It is interesting how Locke talks about harmony in different ways: rule 2 prefigures the Rule of the Octave, with harmonizations dictated by position within the key; while rules 4, 6 and 7 (and possibly even 3) specify harmonizations based on the motion of the bass. Evidently, these were important aspects a thorough-bass player would have to think about.

Of thee three stylistic rules, rule 8 is most obviously interesting to this study, as it specifies a way for the theorbo to play, and is perhaps counterintuitive for modern theorbo players accustomed to simplifying bass lines and prioritizing harmonies. Rule 9 is also pertinent, and comes naturally when playing with low theorbo basses.

b) John Blow, *Rules for playing of a Thorough Bass*

John Blow's undated *Rules for playing of a Thorough Bass upon Organ and Harpsicon*[16] provides 20 rules. I paraphrase them as follows:

1. Defining consonances (perfect and imperfect) and dissonances.
2. Play 853 over every semibreve, minim, or crochet unless a 6 is figured; no parallel 5ths and 8ths; play "as shall happen most convenient to your hand".
3. Any note of chord can be on top.
4. Figure 6 means 63.
5. Close voice leading between 53 chords, bass moving up a fourth then down a third, and bass moving down a fourth then up a fifth.
6. How accidentals in figures work.
7. Prepare and resolve dissonances.
8. 5-6 ascent.
9. Cadence always goes 4-#3, 8-b7.
10. Flat (minor) keys can cadence on scale degrees 1, 3, 5; Sharp (major) can cadence on on 1, 3, 4, 5.
11. If the bass moves by quavers or semiquavers, right hand doesn't need to play more than once every 2 or 4 quavers,

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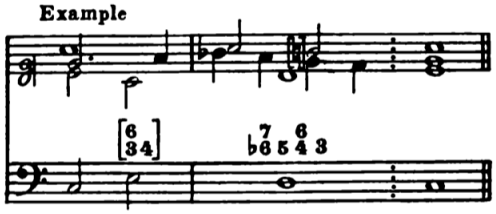
[16] Blow John, "Rules for Playing of a Thorough Bass upon Organ and Harpsicon," in *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass* by F.T. Arnold, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1965), 163–72.

12. If a figure has a dissonance, add a 3rd and 5th.
13. 5-6 ascent, 6-5 or 64-53 descent.
14. When two notes ascend or descend stepwise, one of them has a 6.
15. When playing 5 parts, scalar ascent, 7-8 in treble (!), 5-6 in LH upper voice (tenor).
16. Half cadence in four steps is b6-5-4-3, common cadence in 4 parts is natural10-9-8-7 (all over a sharp 3rd), common cadence divided in two with bass motion b7-6-5-5 with treble 1-7 half notes (pasted from Arnold below).

[16] 'The half Cadence divided by 4 Crochets, ♭ 6, 5th, [4th], & 3:[10]

Example

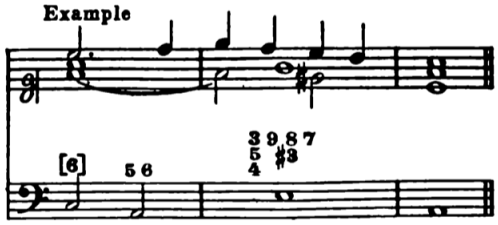
[Ex.22]



'The comon Cadence divided by 4 crochets, 3, 9th, & 8th, & 7th:

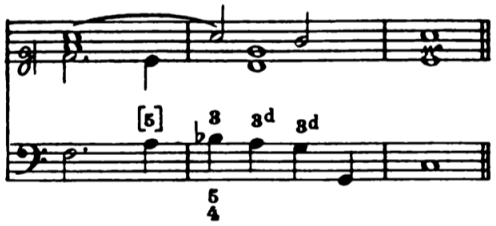
Example

[Ex.23]

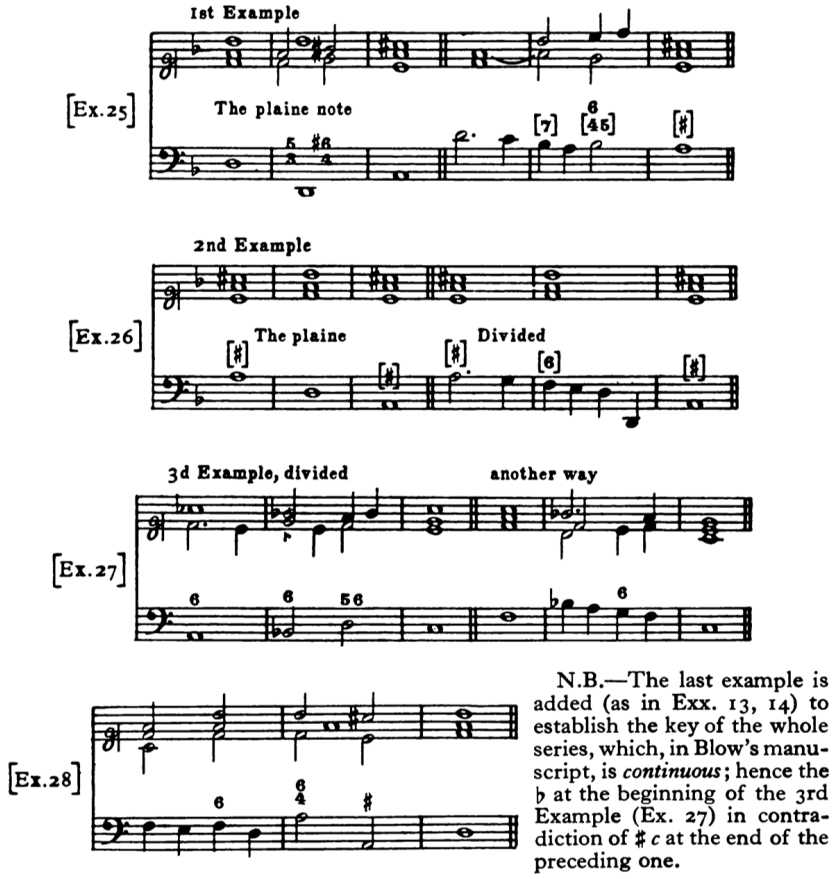


'The comon Cadence divided by moving from the ♭ 9th & 3d to y^e 3d:[11]

[Ex.24]



17. Four ways of playing half cadence in minor keys, decorated (with divisions) and undecorated (pasted from Arnold below).



18. The figure 642 must be preceded by a consonant chord.
19. The figure b7 b5 right before cadence (on scale degree #4) usually means that preceding scale degree 5 bass is major (dominant) (pasted from Arnold below).
20. Whether thirds are major or minor in a few key signatures.

I categorize Blow's rules into the following categories: rules 1, 6, and 20 are musical notation rudiments; rules 2, 3, and 7 are basics of harmony and counterpoint; rules 4, 12, 18, 19 concern how to realize particular figures; rules 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 concern how to realize certain bass progressions and cadences; and rules 5 and 11 concern style. There is some overlap with Locke, though the cadences and sequences are a bit more adventurous. Blow omits the rules about harmonizing particular scale degrees, and includes a rule about which notes cadences are allowed upon, making his treatise feel more old-fashioned (along with the cross relation between G in the soprano and G# in the alto in the second example from Rule 16). The rules of style are close voice leading and fewer chords per bar, which Locke already

gave us. The major takeaways from this treatise for me, in the context of continuo realizations, are the additional harmonization examples provided, and the shared stylistic guidance with Locke. The harmonizations to me indicate a horizontal approach, in which the movement of individual voices is more important than a conception of tonality.

3. Mace, *Musick's Monument*

Thomas Mace's *Musick's Monument* is a uniquely thorough source on lute playing from the late 17th century. The final chapter of the part of his tome dedicated to the lute offers "*Directions* for *Playing* a *Part* upon the *Theorboe*".[17] Mace first instructs the student to learn the notes of the scale (suggesting that a smaller theorbo could be tuned to A if need be), before directing his attention to what the student must learn: how chords, dissonances, meter, and cadences work. To this end he recommends the student study Christopher Simpson's "*Late* and very *Compleat Works,*"[18] meaning his *Compendium of Practical Musick*, which is essentially a counterpoint book. Mace immediately qualifies this by writing:

> The *Greatest Excellency* in *This Kind* of *Performance*, lies beyond whatever *Directions* can be given by *Rule*. The *Rule* is an *Easie*, *Certain*, and *Safe Way* to walk by; but He that shall not *Play* beyond the *Rule*, had sometimes better be *Silent*; that is, He must be able (together with the *Rule*) to *Lend His Ear*, to the *Ayre* and *Matter* of the *Composition* so, as (upon very many *Occasions*) He must forsake His *Rule*; and instead of *Conchords*, pass through all manner of *Discords*, according to the *Humour* of the *Compositions* He shall meet with. This *Thing* will require a *Quick Discerning Faculty* of the *Ear*; an *Able Hand*; and a *Good Judgement*. The 1st of which must be given in *Nature*; the 2 last will come with *Practice*, and *Care*.[19]

More than imploring us to learn composition, he implores us to be sensitive to our ears, and play according to its dictates rather than blindly following general rules.

Mace gives voicings for chords in 8 keys, major and minor, giving affects for certain ones, and encouraging the use of diapasons, arguing that it makes the lute easier and fuller in its sound. Next, he writes that he will "show… the way of *Amplifying* your *Play*, by *Breaking* your *Parts*, or *Stops*, in way of *Dividing-Play* upon *Cadences*, or *Closes*; which is one of the most *Compleat*, and *Commendable Performances* upon a

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[17] Mace, *Musick's Monument*, 216.

[18] Ibid, 217

[19] Ibid, 217.

Theorboe in *Playing* of a *Part*."[20] It is worth referencing his earlier discussion of dividing play, which is in contrast to what he calls Raking play, or playing many-string chords with the thumb and index finger.[21] This raking technique is similar to that described in French lute books of the time.[22] Mace doesn't discuss raking play in his discussion of theorbo playing, though this way of playing chords is earlier presented as the general rule for playing all full chords. [23] His continuo style likely included both raking and dividing, but the dividing style was perhaps especially effective at cadences. I've transcribed Mace's cadence-examples into staff notation. They are hard to neatly categorize, but generally speaking, some are divisions in 1 to 3 voices, some are arpeggios, some are trill-figures, and others are combinations of these. They are instructive in considering how a style of theorbo continuo could have adorned to North's liking.

Mace nexts offers a few "observations":[24]

1. Know what key you're in, based on the bass's cadence-note.
2. See if the third above that note is sharp or flat.
3. See what chords you play in the key: the General Rule is that you always play a 53, except play 6 chords on the two notes of the scale that are under half steps, or any sharpened note, or on scale degree 3 even if it's flat; 6 could be used elsewhere, trust your Eye and Ear; never begin or end a section with a 6, but sometimes it's nice to pause on a 6.
4. figures alter this general rule, but never clash flat third and sharp third; avoid parallels.

Mace's "observations" are all proto-rule of the octave, based not on the the subsequent bass motion but on the relation to the tonic.

Mace follows these observations with the following rules about realizing cadences:[25]

1. Cadences always contain a mixture of concords and discords.
2. 3rd following the 4th must always be sharp.

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[20] Mace, *Musick's Monument*, 221.

[21] Ibid, 101.

[22] For a discussion of French baroque lute prefeces, see George Torres, "Performance Practice Technique for the Baroque Lute: An Examination of the Introductory Avertissements from Seventeenth-Century Sources," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 36 (2003): 19–48.

[23] Mace, *Musick's Monument*, 92.

[24] Ibid, 225-26.

[25] Ibid, 227.

3. Examples of how to decorate a double cadence.
4. #3 goes with #6, b3 with b6
5. Decorations of cadences with 7ths and 6ths are appropriate to long cadences.

Mace also provides harmonizations of scalar ascents and descents with sixths and a few 7-6 suspensions, as well as another example of dividing-play and an example transposed to indicate that the student should learn these examples in all keys. While not all rules will apply to all musical cases, Mace is largely teaching by example, giving the student expectations that will be useful in realizing bass patterns as they arise in real music. It is also worth noting that, like Locke but unlike Blow, Mace employs both the tonal and bass-progression conceptions of harmonization.

Mace leaves us with three parting observations:

1. While the rules are important, "*Experience* and *Practice*" are needed to learn how to properly accompany.
2. When the bass moves quickly, you only need to play a chord every 2 or 4 bass notes, and play the other notes singly or with a single line above "as the *Descant* requires."
3. Feel free to move voices by an octave.

These observations dovetail nicely with the comments from the other sources discussed in this paper. The mention of the descant in the second observation suggests that the theorbo could at times "touch the air", to use North's term, and the suggestion of reduced chords is a repetition of a rule stated by Locke and Blow. Rule 3 accords with the information found in the organ books Herrisone discusses. By giving the student examples of how to play patterns and imploring them to listen to context, Mace was preparing them to be sensitive accompanists without needing to read from a score.

Conclusion

I will close by summarizing a few major takeaways from this study:

1. The theorbo was a very common continuo instrument across genres in Restoration England. The theorbo of this period was a 12-course lute tuned with the old renaissance G tuning rather than the *accords nouveaux* used for solo playing at the time.
2. The horizontal concept was important in thorough-bass: organists doubled the lines of imitative polyphony and added independent contrapuntal material, and Mace

advocates for theorbists to add their own divisions over bass lines, especially at cadences.
3. Harmony was conceived of in two parallel ways at this time: bass-movements provided some rules of harmonization, while scale-degree harmonization (i.e., specifying a 6th on certain scale-degrees) provided others.
4. Textural variety and style were important to making a good accompanist: North and Mace suggest a wide variety of different accompaniment textures, from arpeggiating, to inventing melodies, to doubling the vocal part, to simply striking chords.
5. While certain stylistic rules—fewer chords over fast bass lines, close voice-leading—were commonly agreed upon, there was (as there still is) a certain ineffable quality to good continuo playing that could only be learned through practice and thorough knowledge of counterpoint and composition.

This discussion of the sources certainly does not answer all questions about continuo playing on theorbos at the time, but it gives a basis for understanding what the parameters were, and what the musical setting looked. One overlooked aspect in this paper that I hope to study further in the future is the role of the guitar. There was a craze for the guitar in Stuart England,[26] and it seems likely to me that the guitar may have had a great effect on the continuo styles, from texture to the rule of the octave-style harmonizations. Another is to study how music of the Restoration is accompanied in modern recordings, and discuss the effectiveness of various methods.

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[26] Christopher Page, *The Guitar in Stuart England: A Social and Musical History*, Musical Performance and Reception (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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