

# Ornamentation in Baroque Music: How Is It Appropriately Utilized in Scores and Performances?

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates the diversity and significance of the flexible use of ornamentation in the Baroque music by analyzing the use of ornamentation in George Frederick Handel's and Johann Sebastian Bach's scores, as well as in the instrumental and vocal performance of their musical works. The methodology used in this study was based on a qualitative approach: documentary analysis, using the relevant literature searched to analyse the information and draw conclusions. Details about the following information were obtained by the author: the findings showed that, firstly, ornamentation should be added in a pattern that is within the framework originally framed by the composer and not overly embellished; secondly, the proper incorporation of specific instruments (e.g., harpsichord) and ornamentation makes the piece more baroque; and last but not least, ornamentation should be complementary to the melody and the composition in order to achieve the best effect of it. In general, ornamentation enhances the beauty and enriches the tune of a piece, whose value in Baroque music is unshakable.

**Keywords:** Baroque music, Ornamentation, Handel, Bach, *Sarabande*, *Giulio Cesare*

## 1. Introduction

The ornamentation was at its peak during the Baroque period and has developed into an essential embellishment in all genres of music to nowadays, there are also numerous composers of this period who are known for their ornamentation works, such as J. S. Bach, George Friedrich Handel, Antonio Vivaldi and others. The Baroque art style is inextricably linked to religion, and its most fundamental form is characterized by a break with the seriousness of the Renaissance and a reverence for luxury, which has led to its derivation into art, literature and other aspects. Many music professionals consider the freestyle of ornamentation to be a way in which they can show their abilities, and after reading the book *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J.S. Bach* (Neumann, 1983), the book provides an overview of the nature, examples, and definition of ornamentation, it also illustrates the three different regional ornaments of the time: French, Italian and German.

The main aim of this paper is therefore to examine the purpose of ornamentation and to argue, using the works of Bach and Handel as examples, whether ornamentation is necessary in music, whether vocal or instrumental, and to explore the question of whether ornamentation always has to be used in Baroque music, was it possible to leave the ornamentation out of the piece at the period? Or is it also probable that the ornamentation is complex and frequent in the piece? If the answer is no, how does this article go about explaining it. Although much academic research has been done on this subject, what I can do is read the articles and summarize the best of them, arguing for the need for ornamentation.

## 2. The Role and Purpose of Ornamentation

Ornamentum is originally a Latin word meaning embellishment. For aesthetic purposes, complementing any

human or social subject in a harmonious manner makes sense. So how should it play an embellished role in music?—That is sound. Ornamentation is essential in musical culture. In Baroque music, ornamentation is an important feature and a vital part of the music. And it is considered as an additional decoration to the basic melodic line and fundamental structure of the piece, used to modify the notes duration of the musical melody as well as other notation, including some of the non-chord tones. As for in music, ornamentation varies according to the period, geography, genre of origin and the style of the composer. Ornamentation can be thought of as a living organism, without which music is inconceivable, so it is reasonable to assume that ornamentation is the primary means of musical expression (Bakirova, 2020).

There are many different types of ornamentation, such as *appoggiatura* (one of the most important and common ornaments of the Baroque period), vibrato/trill, mordent, and so on. In general, the composer will give ornamental performance notations (specific to the notes) in the score, sometimes allowing the performer to improvise as they play. Conversely, when the composer does not give specific notations, the performer needs to introduce appropriate ornamentation into the music to add beauty and expressiveness (Timmers & Ashley, 2007). In short, it means that the performer should add deeper embellishments within the boundaries framed by the composer; if the performer is only concerned with presenting him/herself, it is likely to run counter to the original meaning of the piece.

While Marpurg believed that ‘embellishing baroque music is one of the most delightful aspects of performing it’, he also argued that there is no need for or desire to over-embellish. He considered that a performer who repeatedly adds too much ornamentation is like a gentleman who bows at every word as he pays homage to a woman (Halford, 1980). Meanwhile, there are two styles of ornamentation used in Baroque music—Italian and French styles. Among them, the Italian Baroque keyboard music focuses more on adding ornamentation to the basic melody, letting the music play flamboyantly and freely. This influence is directly related to the rise of opera (Locke, 2009). In early operas, melodies could be improvised to some extent by the singer. This ornamental component was influenced by vocal works to instrumental works and was one of the reasons for the emergence of ornamentation. French Baroque keyboard music, on the other hand, pays attention to systematic ornamentation, marked entirely with ornamental notation.

In his book *On Playing the Flute*, Johann Joachim Quantz (1791) identifies two different types of decoration, which are the *Wesentliche Manieren* and the *Willkiirliche Veranderungen*. The first is called French ornamentation and has a more fixed pattern, the other is Italianate ornamentation that can be freely and melodically transformed into more elaborate *coloratura* (Hashimoto, 1979). I would also like to mention that the music before 1770 was originally written for the harpsichord, an instrument without pedals. Among the composers known at the time for the harpsichord were J. S. Bach, Francois Couperin, George Handel, and many others. Today, most of their works are played on modern pianos, however the music of the Baroque period was played on the harpsichord and therefore ornamentation was needed to maintain the continuity of note time values. In addition to this, ornamentation helps to enhance the acoustic and melodic mood of the harpsichord, as well as to emphasize certain rhythms, melodies and gaps between chords (Zaslaw, 1981).

### 3. The Uses of Ornamentation in Instrumental Music

Several studies have shown that emotional communication in modern musical performance is conveyed through the medium of ornamentation. Notes that can be added to a melody as a melodic variation, usually in relation to and elaborated by the melodic note to which they belong, are referred to as ornamentation. During the Baroque period, ornamentation was a significant aspect of performing Western classical music. For example, Carl P. E. Bach argued that for every emotion, whether happy or sad, “Ornamentation will provide the right kind of assistance” (Timmers & Ashley, 2007). When it comes to Bach, J. S. Bach is world-famous for his works from the Baroque period, such as the *Brandenburg Concertos*, *the Matthäus-Passion*, and many other pieces. But I would like to talk about one of his many suites, *Englische Suiten*, which current research suggests was written around 1715.

The *Sarabande in a minor* has no ornamentation and is mostly in quavers, with a relaxed rhythm that would lose some of its baroque character if played on a modern piano, while the *Sarabande in g minor* is in denser semiquavers with a lot of ornamentation, which is faster and designed to help the tempo flow, especially in pieces with slow sign. With ornamentation, although the overall tempo of the piece remains the same, aurally it is slightly faster than the original tempo, so adding neighbour notes, passing note and other ornamentation to the piece helps the melody flow (Gould, 2003). We can see in Score 1, the original and modified version of *Sarabande*, where it is written “Les agneeded de la meme Sarabande”, meaning “an ornamented version of the synonymous Sarabande”. We can notice that the original version has a fugue form with four different melodic lines and some ornamentation in it, but since it is mostly in quavers, the presence of ornamentation allows for a smoother articulation of the piece. Later revised versions combine ornamentation and semiquavers to enable the tune itself to be played more fluently on the harpsichord (Xiong, 2021).

Sarabande.

Les agréments de la même Sarabande.

B.W. XLV. (1)

The image displays a musical score for a Sarabande. The top section, labeled 'Sarabande.', consists of four systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The music is in 3/4 time and A minor. The bottom section, labeled 'Les agréments de la même Sarabande.', consists of five systems of music, each with a single treble staff. The music is in 3/4 time and A minor. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, accidentals, and ornaments.

Figure 1. Score1: International Music Score Library Project. 2006. English Suite No.2 in A minor, BWV 807.

Source: [https://imslp.org/wiki/English\\_Suite\\_No.2\\_in\\_A\\_minor,\\_BWV\\_807\\_\(Bach,\\_Johann\\_Sebastian\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/English_Suite_No.2_in_A_minor,_BWV_807_(Bach,_Johann_Sebastian)) [access date: 24 April 2022]

Bach's ornamentation is typically credited to the French Clavecinists, particularly Couperin's harpsichord work, albeit he used them for other musical goals. The ornamentation in French harpsichord music is as crucial as the pirouettes in a particular dance form to the musical skeleton. However, in most cases, they are an additional component of composition, whereas in Bach's works, they fill in the gaps in the melodic design and become an unnoticeable part of the piece. He, therefore, expands and alters some of them (Lockspeiser, 1935). As I mentioned before, ornamentation was initially introduced to compensate for the shortcomings of Baroque instruments, which at the time had a single sound that did not allow for much lengthening of the sound, nor did the contrast between intensity and weakness compare with that of the modern piano, so it had to rely on rich ornamentation and melodic voice parts to enhance the acoustics and make the sound fuller so that the composer could use it to express ideas and emotions (Neumann, 1983).

The ornamentation that was so perfectly developed in instrumental music can also be applied well to vocal music. An important feature of the vocal art of the Baroque period was the extensive use of ornamentation. In this particular historical era, musicians in the service of the court and the aristocracy added a great deal of ornamentation to the main melody of the music in order to reflect the grandeur of their compositions as much as the upper classes, which made the use of ornamentation an integral part of the vocal style of the Baroque (Butt, 1991). So I would like to analyse a vocal work by George Friedrich Handel, also a representative of the Baroque period, to illustrate how essential the use of ornamentation was in this era.

#### 4. The Existence of Ornamentation in Vocal Works

How should ornamentation be presented in a vocal work? I think that the freedom of the singers to use their voices in the work is an expression of this. Here I would like to refer to the third act of *Da tempeste il legno infranto* from one of Handel's classic operas, *Giulio Cesare*. The aria, sung by the soprano Cleopatra, is a delicate and emotional piece with a large and coloratura. Handel used the technique of writing homophonic music in composing this aria, a major aria running through A-B-A. This piece incorporates a wide range of ornaments (e.g., upper and lower scale runs, trill, tautophony) in the Allegro section to flesh out the melodic part and better enhance the dynamics of the rhythmic section (Dean, 1963). In general, the recapitulation of an aria is a cadenza section where the singer can present his or her vocal technique and enhance the theme and power of the music. I have taken a small fragment of the original score to compare it with the free play of the ornamentation of the singer (use the version recorded by Bartoli as a comparison).

The image shows a musical score for a vocal work. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (soprano) and a basso continuo line. The lyrics are: "to, se poi sal - vo giun - ge in por - to, non sà più che de - si - ar, che de - si - ar, che de - si - ar;". The score includes various ornaments such as trills and grace notes, particularly in the vocal line. The tempo is marked "Allegro".

Figure 2. Score 2: International Music Score Library Project. 2007. Giulio Cesare in Egitto, HWV 17.

Source: [https://imslp.org/wiki/Giulio\\_Cesare\\_in\\_Egitto%2C\\_HWV\\_17\\_\(Handel%2C\\_George\\_Frideric\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Giulio_Cesare_in_Egitto%2C_HWV_17_(Handel%2C_George_Frideric)) [access date: 24 April 2022]

We can see that the note connections in the original score do not give a sense of urgency, but rather are slow, and

although semiquavers are present, they are mostly dominated by crotchets and quavers. Whereas in the audio we hear Bartoli using scale slides up and down, echoes, appoggiatura, and so on, turning the slow crotchets and quavers into an almost semiquavers presence, all within the key around the main tone. Also, the ornamental melodic direction is always in the major and minor second intervals so I think all these ornaments are particularly demanding on the singer's ability to use the ornamentation to make the tune better (Butt, 1991).

Although it is a tasteful way to add some ornamentation to a vocal piece, too much embellishment could have a negative effect instead. The trill, for example, should not be used as often as the appoggiaturas, otherwise, the listener will get bored. The use of ornamentation should be proportional to the content of the piece, whether it is appropriately placed to convey the emotion of a particular part of the lyrics, and whether the weight of the ornamentation should be controlled so that it does not become a burden on the emotion (Price, 2001). Malgoire, despite his use of a strong cast and an orchestra of baroque instruments, the effect was unsatisfactory. Malgoire has some quirky ideas about tempo and phrasing, and his band sometimes has some creative ideas about rhythm and pitch. He over-emphasizes the rhythm and weakens the two marches of the third act by punctuating every quaver in sight; the dramatic tension of *Rinaldo* and *Armida* in the second act, while being cut to pieces by the ever-delaying conflict, is brought down to a lower level by the extremely exaggerated way in which the music is handled (Dean et al., 1978).

In Handel's arias, the frequent use of ornamentation is not arbitrary; the free playful approach to the recapitulation section is intended to reinforce the theme. For the performer, the inclusion of ornamentation also requires a certain method, such as the use of sequence of ornamentation and the crescendo or decrescendo of a single note. Regardless of the reasons for the use of ornamentation, they are not essential to the melody, rather they are arbitrary ornaments, but for our tastes, a presence that has become necessary. Ornaments are therefore an essential part of a great performance. They are all the more worthy of a singer's attention, because if he understands and knows how to perform them with ease, he will certainly bring out the best in his singing (Hiller & Beicken, 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

Although there are no explicit criteria for adding ornamentation to Baroque music, this paper has established that performers, both modern and Baroque, must have a fundamental understanding of Baroque performance technique. Using different versions of the same work as examples, it is argued that the addition of ornamentation can reflect the rich emotional colours within the composers and performers, but that ornamentation should not be overused in order to accentuate the performance, instead it should be used and added appropriately. It also emerges from the text that the purpose of ornamentation was initially to make the music more refined and without flaws, since at first it was used to compensate for the shortcomings of the instruments of the period. But with skillful and appropriate use by musicians such as Bach, ornamentation has come to play its role, which is to embellish and complete the tune.

After all, in a time when sophistication and prosperity were the dominant features, plus, musicians were serving the upper classes and aristocracy of the Baroque period, ornamentation in music could also represent the ability of the composer, and as I mentioned in the article, ornamentation corresponded to the extravagant prosperity of the aristocracy. I would nevertheless like to say that my research has not been sufficiently detailed, and although there is a lot of literature to read on ornamentation in the Baroque period, some of the scores of the time are difficult to search for, so I will remain focused on this topic and will try to do better in the future.

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