Alternative Styles "Season to Taste":
The Art of Ornamentation in Baroque Music

by Nancy Wilson

The year is 1752. In what has been called "the classic of Baroque music instruction," Johann Joachim Quantz infamously comments about the viola in his book *On Playing the Flute*:

> The viola is commonly regarded as of little importance in the musical establishment. The reason may well be that it is often played by persons who are either still beginners in the ensemble or have no particular gifts with which to distinguish themselves on the violin…. I maintain, however, that … the violist must be just as able as the second violinist…. He needs to know [all that the violinist needs to know].[1]

Fortunately, the days of the "weak violist" are long gone; today's violists can more than hold their own with colleagues in ensembles as well as in solo situations. The increased interest in historically informed performance makes knowledge of ornamentation in Baroque music all the more pertinent. Violists can enjoy ornamentation in transcriptions of violin or cello works, in Telemann's viola concerto, or, albeit discreetly, in an ensemble. I hope that this simple guide will provide a starting point in your exploration of the art of ornamentation.

In the Baroque period, music was inextricably linked with rhetoric: the goal of the performer was to move the listener. As Quantz put it:

> Musical execution may be compared with the delivery of an orator. The orator and the musician have, at bottom, the same aim in regard to both the preparation and the final execution of their productions, namely to make themselves masters of the hearts of their listeners, to arouse or still their passions, and to transport them now to this sentiment, now to that. Thus it is advantageous to both, if each has some knowledge of the duties of the other.[2]

The role of ornaments—or graces, as they were called—was literally to add grace to the music; that is, to enhance emotional content of music in order to move the listener.

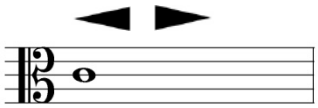
Adding Grace with the Bow

While most of us think of ornaments as trills, turns, mordents, and perhaps long runs of notes, it's important to remember that the expressive use of the bow is the first step in adding grace to a note. After all, the bow was considered the soul of the instrument. Francesco Geminiani describes what I call "bow ornaments" in *The Art of Playing on the Violin*:

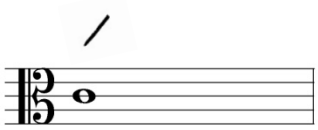
a.) Swelling of sound (crescendo):

b.) Softening of the sound (diminuendo):

c.) *Mezza di voce*: a crescendo followed by a diminuendo:



d.) Plain stroke:



e.) Staccato:

In Example XX, Geminiani shows what he considers to be their proper use, saying: "For it is not sufficient alone to give them their true duration, but also the expression proper to each of these notes. By not considering this, it often happens that many good compositions are spoiled by those who attempt to execute them." (Exs. 1a and 1b.)

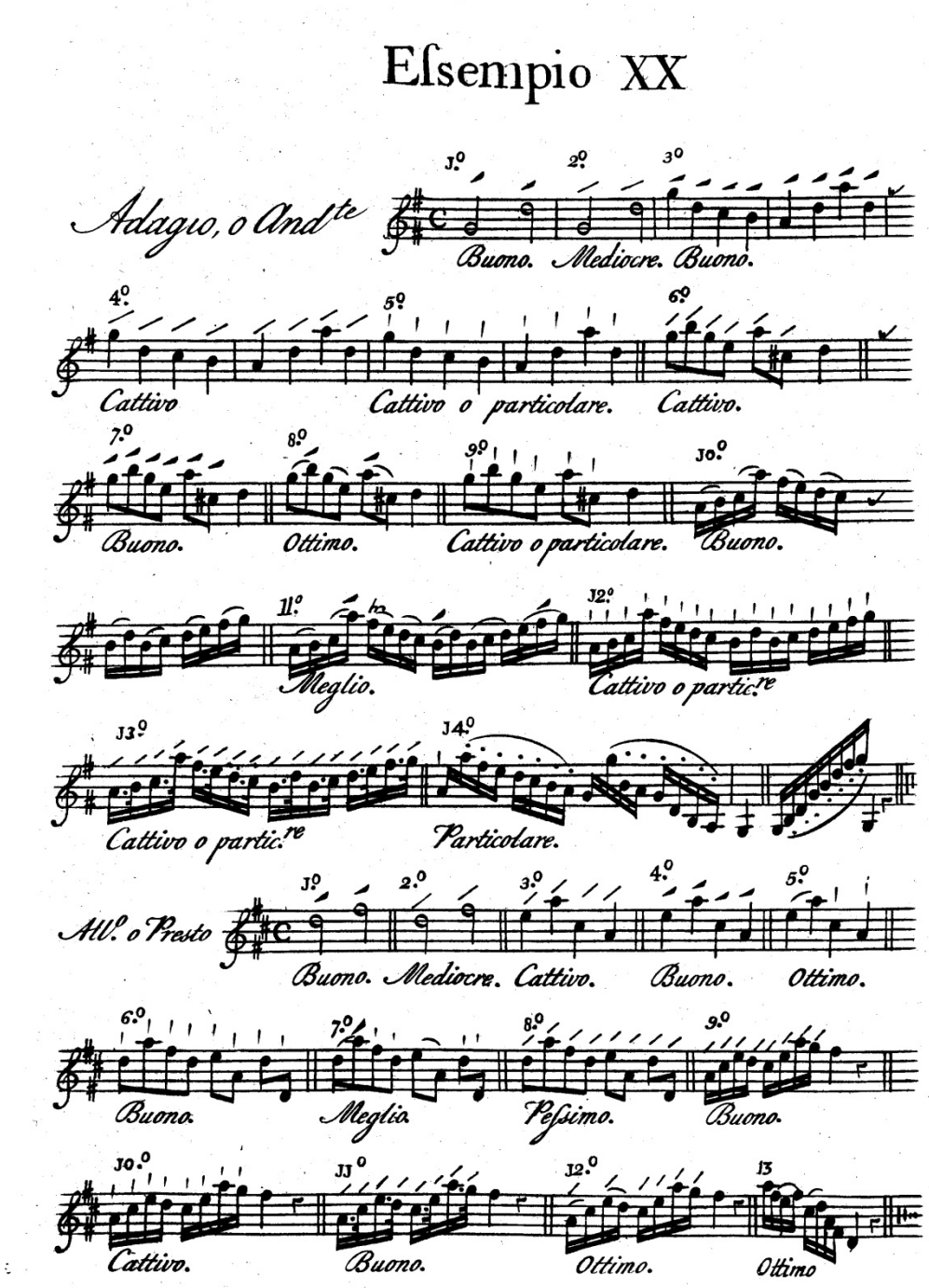
Example 1a. Francesco Geminiani, The Art of Playing on the Violin*, Example XX (text), page [8].*
http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Playing_on_the_Violin,_Op.9_%28Geminiani,_Francesco%29

***Example* XX.**

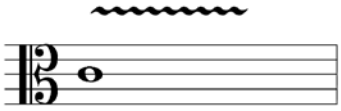
This Example ſhews the Manner of Bowing proper to the Minim, Crochet-quaver and Semiquaver both in ſlow and quick Time. For it is not ſufficient alone to give them their true Duration, but alſo the Expreſſion proper to each of theſe Notes. By not conſidering this, it often happens that many good Compoſitions are ſpoiled by thoſe who attempt to execute them.

You muſt obſerve that this Sign () denotes the Swelling of the Sound; the Sign () ſignifies that the Notes are to be play'd plain and the Bow is not to be taken off the Strings; and this () a Staccato, where the Bow is taken off the Strings at every Note.

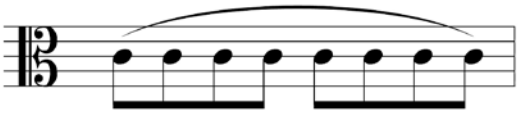
Example 1b. Francesco Geminiani, The Art of Playing on the Violin*, Example XX (music), page 27.*
http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Playing_on_the_Violin,_Op.9_%28Geminiani,_Francesco%29



f.) A tremolo, or bowed vibrato, was also used, by increasing and decreasing the index finger pressure while maintaining a constant bow speed. It is described by Farina as "a pulsing of the hand which has the bow," bringing to mind the shaking of the human voice. While it is prevalent in seventeenth-century music, it is also described by Quantz and used by J. S. Bach:



or, in a more measured fashion:

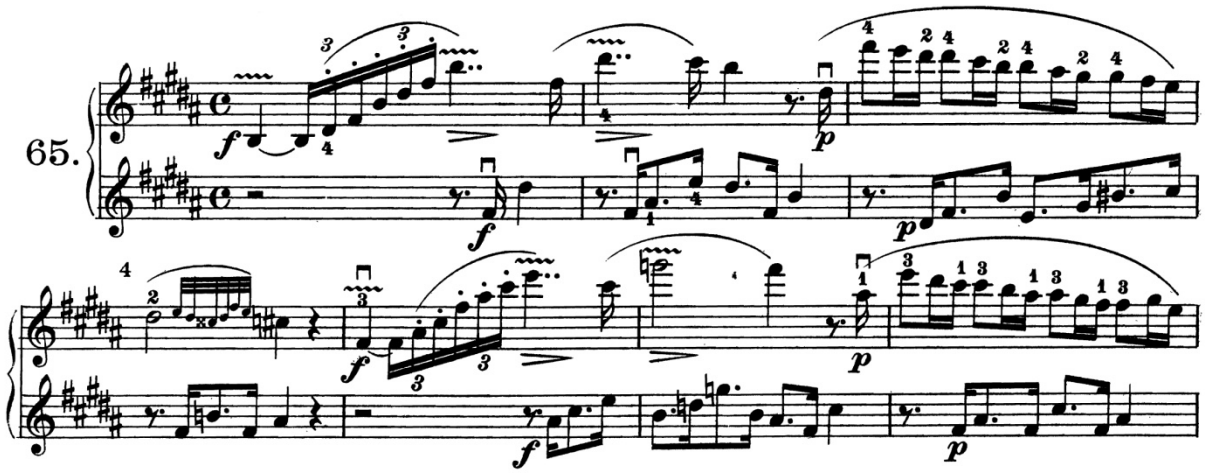


Adding Grace with the Left Hand

I. Vibrato

In the Baroque period the left-hand vibrato was considered to be an ornament, not an integral part of the sound. It was used to imitate the natural shaking of the human voice when filled with emotion, be it love, anger, or fear. Geminiani indicates this "close shake" with ~~~ as does Louis Spohr as late as 1832 in his Violin School (ex. 2). Note that this symbol is the same as that used for the tremolo or bowed vibrato in f.

Example 2. Louis Spohr, Violin School*, No. 65, mm. 1–7.*
http://imslp.org/wiki/Violin_School_%28Spohr,_Louis%29



Because the violin or viola was held without a chinrest or shoulder rest, the vibrato was simply a pressing up and down of a finger on the fingerboard. While this produces a vibrato that is narrower than a typical modern vibrato, there can be great variety in its speed. In this way it can portray love, anger, or fear.

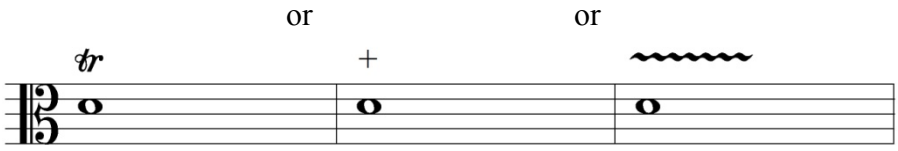
Although it is rarely indicated with a sign in music for the violin, a two-finger vibrato was used by viola da gamba players in the seventeenth century and also described by Tartini in 1771: "There is another kind of trill that is best performed on the violin. The two notes that make it up join in such a way that the two fingers never quite leave the string.... This kind of trill is 'rippled' and not 'struck.'"[3] The effect can be one of palpitation, extreme agitation, or horror.

II. Essential graces

Indicated by signs above the note, these graces are often called French ornaments because, in the words of Quantz, "French composers usually write the embellishments with the [aria], and the performer thus needs only to concern himself with executing them well. In the Italian style in former times, no embellishments at all were set down, and everything was left to the caprice of the performer."[4] Many composers dictate exactly how each grace is to be executed, and it is worth it to study these instructions in detail, as the variety will add richness to your own execution of these graces. The basic consensus is as follows:

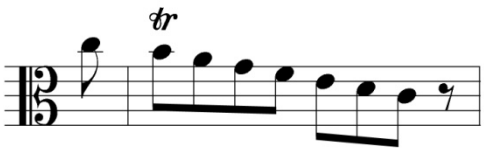
1) Trills

g.) Trill:

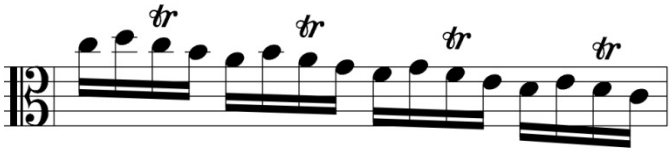


Like the vibrato, the trill was often called a "shake" or "tremolo," as it also connotes the shaking of the voice. Employed as expressive devices, there are an infinite variety of trills. But to simplify, the trill can have three basic functions:

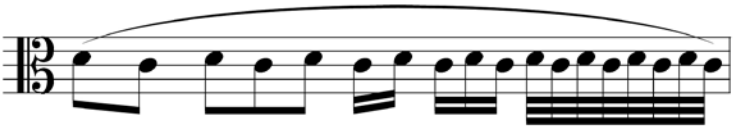
h.) Short, quick, and on beat; serves to accent the note:



i.) Short and quick in passagework; serves to lighten the passage:



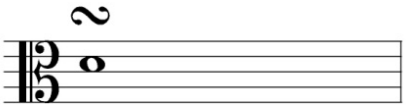
j.) Long, starting slowly and increasing in speed as you proceed; serves to fill out the sound and "swell" the emotional content of the note:



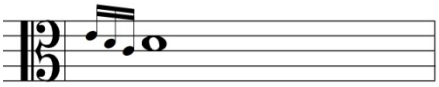
It might be worth mentioning that a fast and prolonged trill that brings to mind an alarm clock has no place in Baroque music, unless you truly intend to sound the alarm. Trills may be started on the main note or on the note above. In general, main note trills are used more often in seventeenth-century music, while upper note trills prevail in music of the eighteenth century.

2) Turns

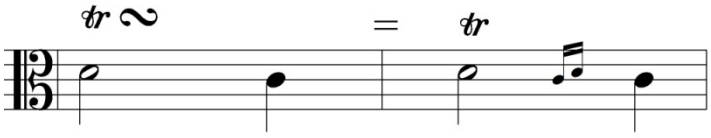
k.) Turn:



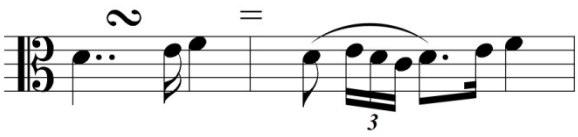
l.) Played quickly and on the beat, the turn can serve to accent the note:



m.) Added at the end of a trill, it can serve to soften the landing of the trill:

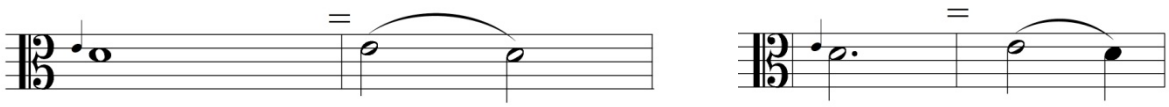


n.) Played in the middle of a note, it can add a “shiver”:

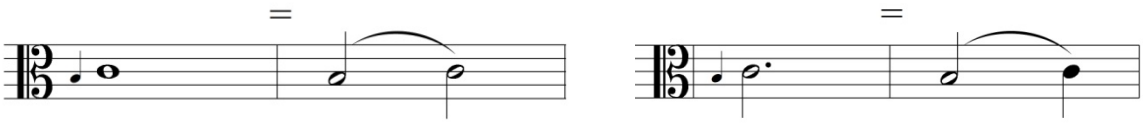


3. Appoggiaturas

o.) Appoggiatura from above:



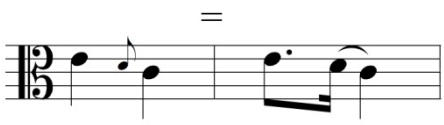
p.) Appoggiatura from below:



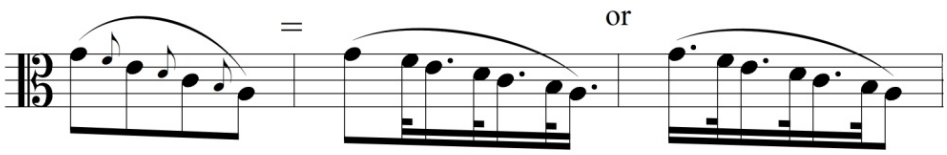
Both of these add weight or leaning to the note. By creating dissonance with the harmony, they also add tension. In general, a leaning appoggiatura is played on the beat and takes half of the value of the note. When it is attached to a dotted quarter or dotted half note, it takes two-thirds of the value of the note. But just as a human sigh has an infinite variety of lengths, the variation in length of appoggiaturas is infinite.

When the appoggiatura comes between a falling third or in a quick succession in passage work, it is usually played quickly and without accent, sometimes before the beat. Indeed, this “passing appoggiatura” should be played so lightly that the listener cannot tell whether it is before the beat or on the beat. This is called a short appoggiatura, or a passing appoggiatura, or *tierce coulé*. In this way it serves to lighten the passage:

q.) Appoggiatura or *tierce coulé*:

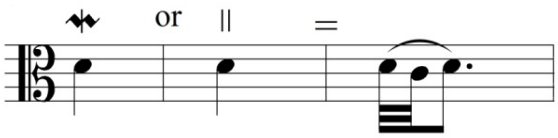


r.) Appoggiatura in passing:



4. Mordents

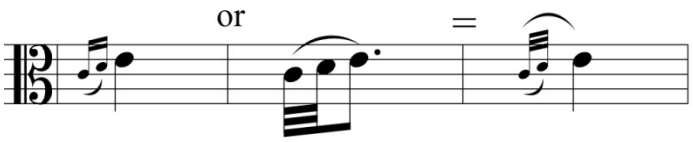
s.) In French this is called a *pincé*, and indeed it serves to "pinch" the note when played quickly on the beat:



t.) In slow or moderate tempi it can also be used to fill out the sound, as a trill might:

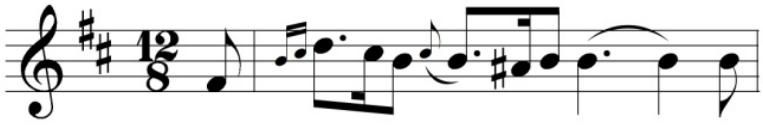
5. Slides

u.) Slide:



This is usually played quickly, either on or before the beat and imitates the voice "swooping" to the note from below, as in a sob, or to connote anticipation (ex. 3).

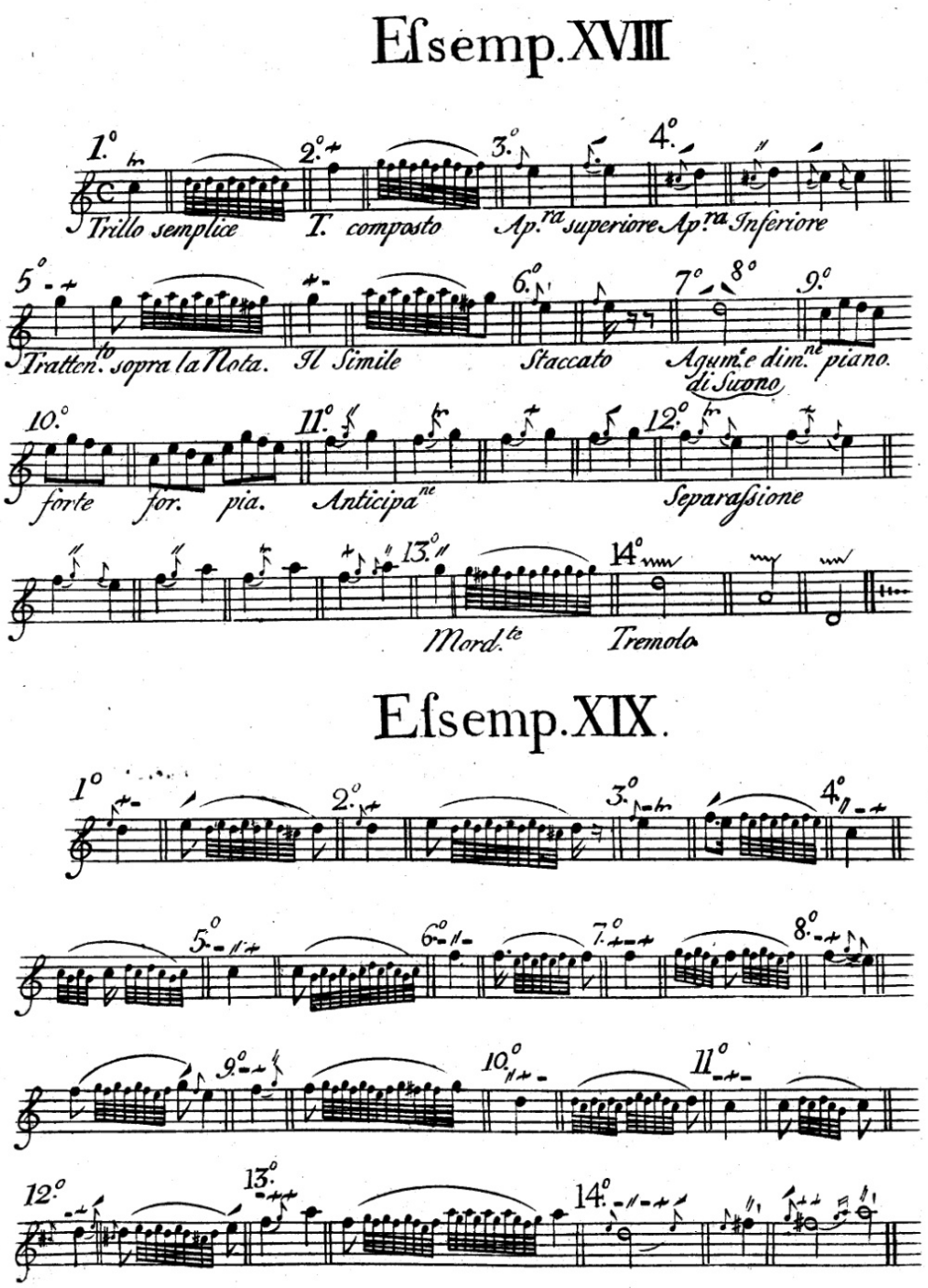
Example 3. J. S. Bach, St. Matthew Passion*, BWV 244, "Erbarme dich," m. 1 (violin solo).*



6. Combinations of the above essential graces

Geminiani's examples XVIII and XIX illustrate these ornaments and their composites beautifully (ex. 4). As his treatise was written in England at the same time as Handel's famous D-Major Violin Sonata, op. 1, no. 13, using Geminiani's graces to ornament the slow movements is completely appropriate and extremely gratifying.

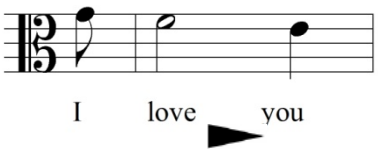
Example 4. Francesco Geminiani, The Art of Playing on the Violin*, Example XVIII and XIX (music), page 26.*
http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Playing_on_the_Violin,_Op.9_%28Geminiani,_Francesco%29



Putting It Together

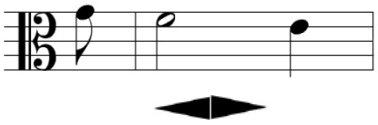
If your eyes are beginning to glaze over, perhaps it's time for a simple exercise to show how you might use these ornaments to heighten the emotional content of your musical narrative. Suppose you have a musical gesture notated: x) and you want to say (with your instrument, not with words) "I *love* you" (you choose the pitches, just include a harmony).

x.)

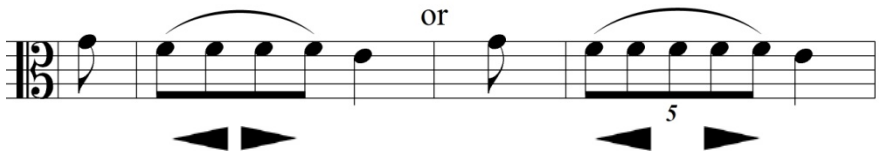


In increasing order of emotional intensity, you might

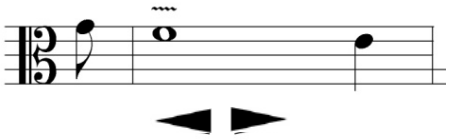
y.) Add a *mezza di voce*:



z.) Add to this a bowed vibrato:

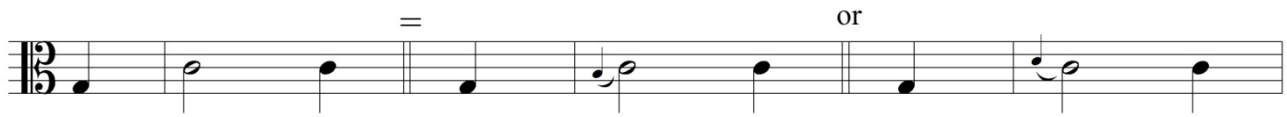


aa.) Instead of the bowed vibrato, add a left-hand vibrato, increasing and diminishing the speed to show the exact nature of your particular love:

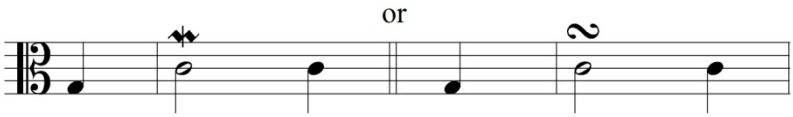


bb.) Instead, use a "rippling" two-fingered vibrato to show even more passion:

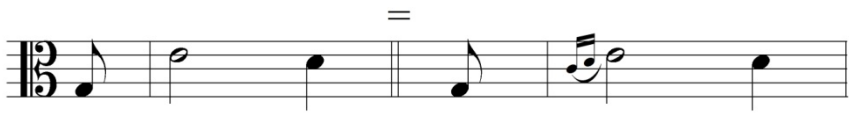
cc.) Or add an essential grace: an appoggiatura, which creates a dissonance with the bass, will make your heart heave:



dd.) A mordent or fast turn will send a shiver up your spine or show the batting of your eyelashes:



ee.) A slide will add a slight sob to your voice:



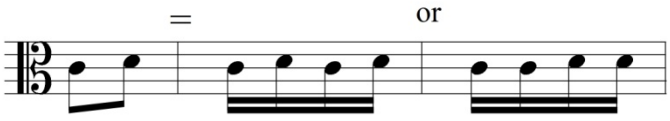
Or add a trill to one of these essential graces; your heart will swell. Now try making all sorts of combinations of these essential graces. Geminiani will help you in his Example XIX.

If you're still feeling a desire to add to your emotional arsenal, it's time to do some composing on-the-spot, or improvising, with division ornaments.

Division Ornaments

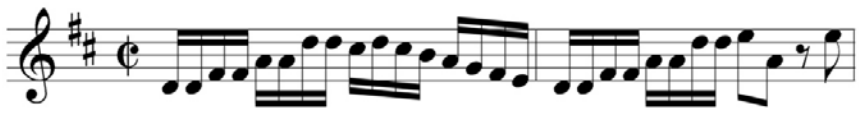
In division ornaments, long notes are divided into notes of shorter value in order to fill in the space between two notes. Below is a very simplified approach to creating division ornaments.

ff.) Double pitches:

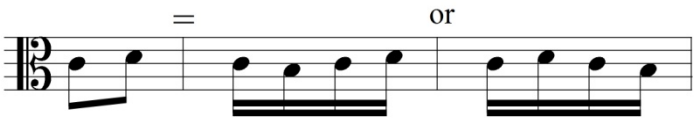


This can add a *concitato* effect, as in the beginning of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg concerto (ex. 5).

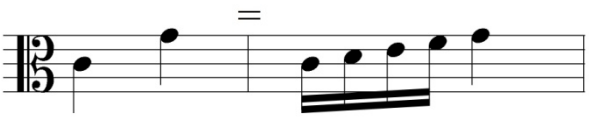
Example 5. J. S. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto No. 5*, BWV 1050, mm. 1–2 (violins).*



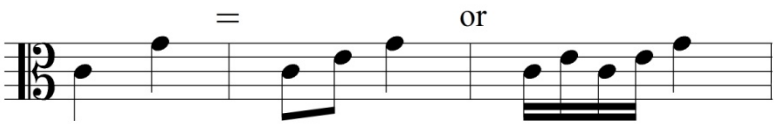
gg.) Turn “around” the pitches:



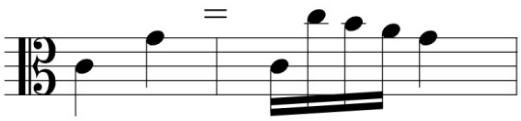
hh.) Fill in notes with a scale. Filling in with a scale can connote easy running or a flight of fancy:



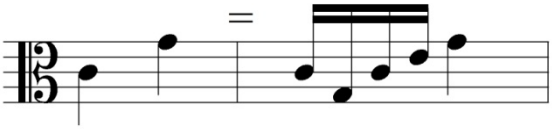
ii.) Fill in notes with an arpeggio, in accordance with harmony. With separate bows you can evoke trumpets; when slurred, you’ll provide more excitement with arpeggios than with scales:



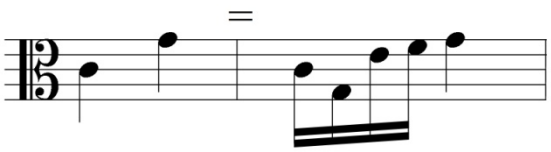
jj.) Leap to another note in the chord and then take a scale back to the second note:



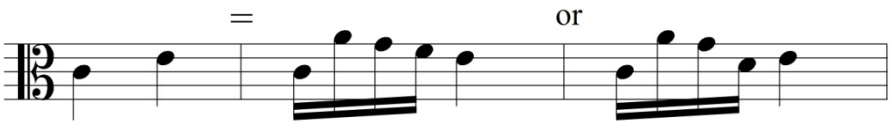
kk.) Leap to another note in the chord and then take arpeggios back to the second note:



ll.) Leap to another note in the chord and take a combination of scales and arpeggios to the second note:

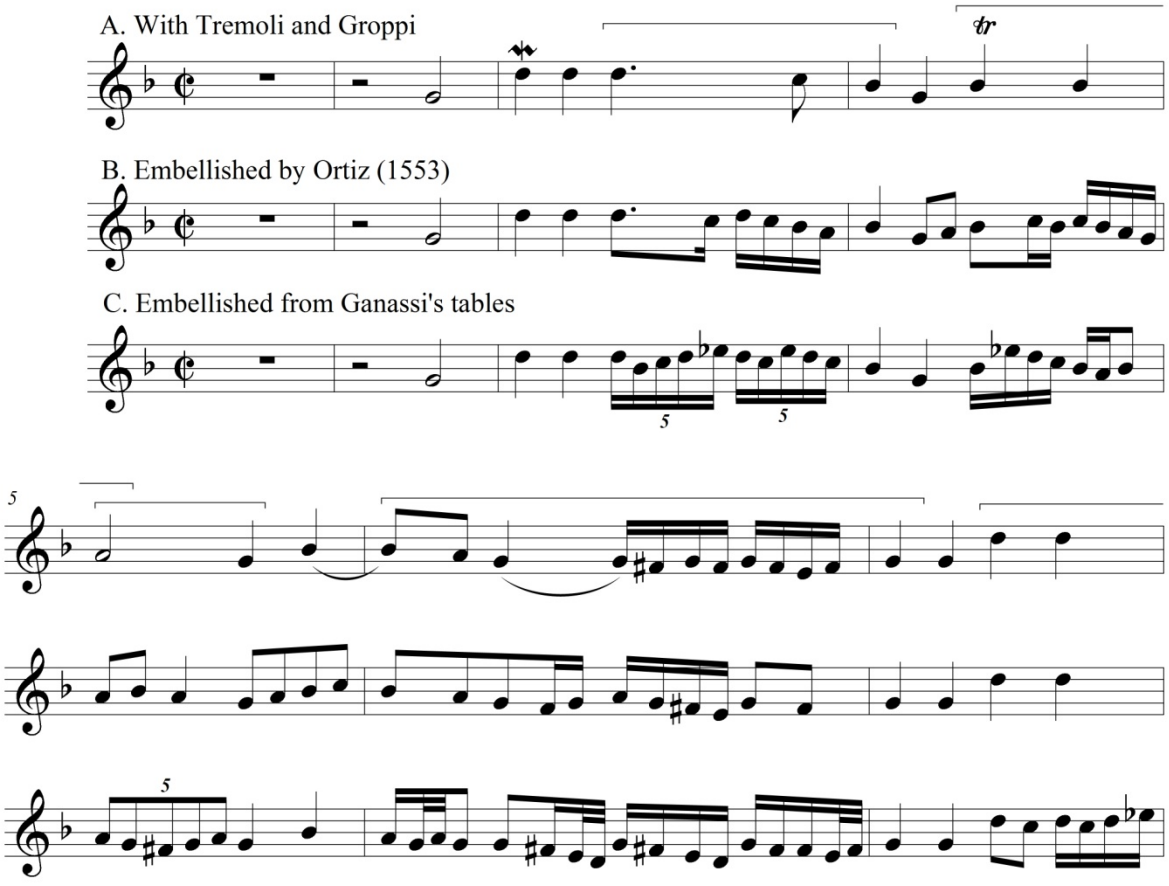


mm.) Leap to a non-chord tone and take a scale, arpeggio, or combination back to the second note:



By varying the rhythm and creating divisions on the division, you can create complex ornaments that enhance the emotion as well as the motion that is inherent in the music. Some great examples of division ornaments based on familiar tunes can be found in Howard Mayer Brown's *Embellishing Sixteenth-Century Music* (ex. 6).

Example 6. Arcadelt, "O felici occhi miei," mm. 1–7 (Three versions from Howard Mayer Brown's Embellishing Sixteenth-Century Music, *12–16*).



Indeed, Italian music of the early seventeenth century by composers such as Castello, Marini, and Fontana can be seen as written out division ornaments over a bass line. In the seventeenth century, it was also common practice to improvise variations over a repeated bass line such as a *passacaglia* or a *ciaconna* or a ground such as *romanesca,* ruggiero, and *Bergamesca*. The Biber Passacaglia from the Sonatas of the Rosary is one such example. Divisions were also used to create variations, or doubles, as in Bach's Partita in B Minor for Solo Violin, BWV 1002.

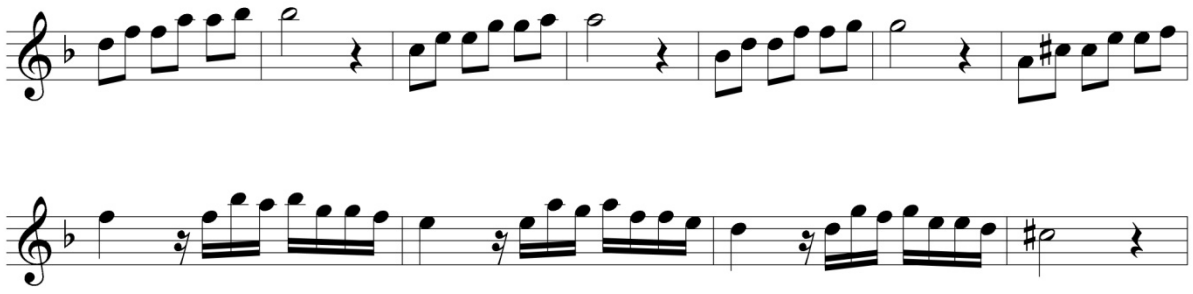
Quantz was referring to both essential graces and division ornaments when he wrote: "In the Italian style in former times no embellishments at all were set down, and everything was left to the caprice of the performer."[5] Many treatises provide tables of ornaments, like "cheat sheets," and musicians were expected to study these and become fluent enough to ornament spontaneously. Quantz's table of ornaments is well worth careful study.

By now you should be well equipped to enhance your piece with ornaments; the only thing you might need to acquire is that crucial aspect of Baroque music: good taste.

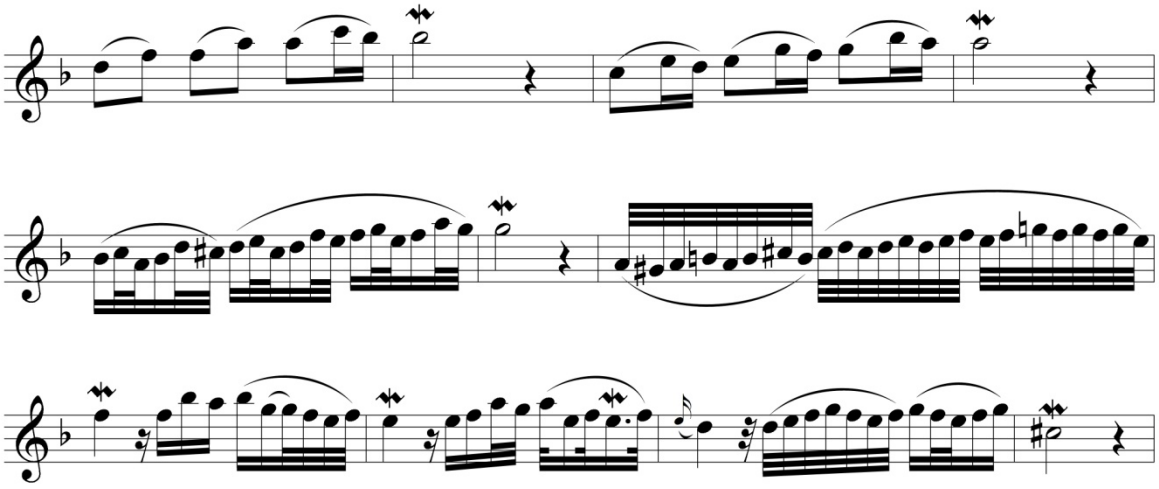
Good Taste

Composers and theoreticians alike were very clear on the absolute importance of good taste and rallied against what they considered to be poor taste. Many composers, Bach included, simply wrote out the ornaments in the hopes that performers would feel no need to add their own. Indeed, in making a harpsichord transcription of Alessandro Marcello's Oboe Concerto in D Minor, Bach added his own ornaments in the second movement; they provide an excellent example of Bach's idea of good taste in ornamentation (exs. 7a–7b).

Example 7a. Alessandro Marcello, Oboe Concerto in D Minor, movt. II, mm. 4–14 (oboe solo).



Example 7b. J. S. Bach, Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor, BWV 974, movt. II, mm. 4–14 (Harpsichord melody).



Others, such as Couperin, explicitly stated that the performer was to play only the ornaments indicated in the score and in exactly the style dictated in his preface. In 1710, Estienne Roger published a version of Corelli's Opus 5 Sonatas for violin and bass, along with what the publisher claimed to be Corelli's own ornaments. No doubt some found these ornaments tasteful while others felt they were over the top. In any case I have found them invaluable for study as well as performance.

For me, Judy Tarling, in *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, beautifully sums up good taste: "Baroque ornamentation should be rhythmically free, should sound improvised, unregulated, and above all express the various 'passions' contained in the music being enhanced."[6]

While your own brand of "good taste" is best developed by deepening your knowledge of national styles within the Baroque period as well as specific intentions of each composer, below are some pointers for getting started.

Know your place: When you are playing an inner voice, there won't be much room for added ornaments. Indeed, in listing the duties of those who accompany a *concertante* part, Quantz says that "a good violist must shun all extempore additions or embellishments in his part."[7] However, you can add much "grace" to your part with the bow alone. If the music is contrapuntal, you could have some fun passing around division ornaments with your friends on other voices.

Stay in character: If you go out of character, do it for a reason.

Bend the rhythm, but don't break it: Ornaments should occur within the basic pulse of the music.

Keep the basic melody and harmony in mind: Ornaments should not obscure basic melody and should honor the underlying harmony. Quantz says:

> Some persons believe that they will appear learned if they crowd an Adagio with many graces, and twist

> them around in such fashion that all too often hardly one note among ten harmonizes with the bass, and little of the principal air can be perceived. Yet in this they err greatly, and show their lack of true feeling for good taste….
> The rarest and most tasteful delicacies produce nausea if over-indulged. The same is true of musical embellishments if we use them too profusely.[8]

There are numerous contemporaneous examples of ornamentation that indeed obscure the melody, so clearly this is something that was done, much to the consternation of Quantz and other proponents of good taste. If you choose to do so, understand that you will be taking on the role of "wild and crazy guy."

It's all about the bass: As many violists know, much of the emotional content of Baroque music comes from the harmonic structure. Dissonances create tension, be it to express sorrow, grief, angst, or love. Consonances relieve that tension and bring a peaceful resolution. Ornaments in the melody should enhance, intensify, and clarify the narrative implied in the harmony. In particular, know that if you add an appoggiatura to a written note already functioning as an appoggiatura, you will actually lessen the tension created by the composer.

Learn to recognize when the composer has written out the ornaments, and treat them as such. If you do so, you may well find there is no need to add more ornaments.

Some practical hints for getting started: Start simple, then build, increasing complexity. By pushing the envelope, you will discover how far you can go before crossing over into "bad taste."

Write out your ornaments at first. Make several versions, varying your style from balanced and rational to dramatic and perhaps a bit crazy!

Practice your cheat sheets (Quantz and others: see Further Reading below).

Spend some time with friends just improvising on a ground bass. You'll have fun, and it will boost your confidence!

Use recordings to inspire, but not to imitate.

Now that you're gaining fluency in creating your own ornaments, use this as a tool for studying Bach. Try reducing his music to a chord progression or melody plus bass line. Create your own ornaments on the simplified version. Compare yours to his; your interpretation of his music will then become richer.

Most important, always keep in mind the reason you have embarked on your mission to ornament in the first place: to enhance the rhetoric and emotion inherent in the music. Simply following the rules to create something superficially pretty and correct will not move your audience. Break the rules if that serves your higher purpose. You'll know you have achieved your goal when your ornaments sound as if they have been improvised on the spot and yet are so compelling that they may as well have been written by the composer himself.

For an example of ornamented viola music, please see the sample score: Movement I and Movement III of Telemann's Viola Concerto with ornamentation by David Miller.

Further Reading

Brown, Howard Mayer. *Embellishing Sixteenth-Century Music*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.
A great cheat sheet for early seventeenth-century music.

Caccini, Giulio. "Preface to *Le nuove musiche* (1602)." In *Source Readings in Music History.* Vol. 4, *The Baroque Era*, edited by Oliver Strunk, 100–113. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998. *Provides early seventeenth-century vocal ornaments, from which evolved early violin style.*

Dickey, Bruce. "Ornamentation in Early-Seventeenth-Century Italian Music." In *A Performer's Guide to 17th-century Music*, edited by Stewart Carter, 245–68. New York: Schirmer, 1997.

Geminiani, Francesco. *The Art of Playing on the Violin*. London, 1751. http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Playing_on_the_Violin,_Op.9_%28Geminiani,_Francesco%29.

Neumann, Frederick. *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.
An exhaustive and detailed treatment of the subject.

Quantz, Johann Joachim. *On Playing the Flute* (1752). 2nd ed., translated by Edward R. Reilly. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
A must read; great cheat sheets for mid-eighteenth century music.

Tartini, Giuseppe. *Treatise on Ornaments* (1771). Translated by Erwin R. Jacobi. Celle, Germany: H. Moeck, 1961.
More cheat sheets.

Tarling, Judy. *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners.* St. Albans, UK: Corda Music, 2000.
An absolute must read and must have for a school library; Judy pulls together information from all of the treatises, adds to this her own experience as a baroque violinist, and presents it clearly and practically. See her chapter 1.5on Ornamentation, 34–62. She has an exhaustive bibliography, including a list of primary sources available in facsimile or modern edition with ornament information (p.57).

Zaslaw, Neal. "Ornaments for Corelli's Sonatas, Op. 5." *Early Music* 24 (1996):95–115.

For ornamentation of the first movement of the Telemann Viola concert in G Major, see "User Friendly Baroque Ornamentation: Five Leading Baroque Performers Clarify Viola Literature" compiled by Patricia McCarty, in *American String Teacher* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 43–52.

Music Examples

Bach, J. S. Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor, BWV 974. http://imslp.org/wiki/16_Konzerte_nach_verschiedenen_Meistem,_BWV_972%E2%80%93987_%28Bach,_Johann_Sebastian%29

———. Partita No. 2 in B Minor, BWV 1002. http://imslp.org/wiki/6_Violin_Sonatas_and_Partitas,_BWV_1001-1006_(Bach,_Johann_Sebastian)

Biber, Franz. Passacaglia from Rosary Sonata XVI. http://imslp.org/wiki/Mystery_%28Rosary%29_Sonatas_%28Biber,_Heinrich_Ignaz_Franz_von%29

Corelli, Arcangelo. Sonatas for Violin and Bass, Opus 5 (Chrysander Edition). http://imslp.org/wiki/12_Violin_Sonatas,_Op.5_%28Corelli,_Arcangelo%29

Marcello, Alessandro. Oboe Concerto in D Minor. http://icking-music-archive.org/ByComposer/Marcello.php

Nancy Wilson is known as one of the leading baroque violinists in the United States and was a founding member of many of America's pioneering period instrument ensembles, including Concert Royal, the Bach Ensemble, Classical Quartet, and Aston Magna. A native of Detroit, Ms. Wilson holds degrees from Oberlin College and The Juilliard School; studied with Dorothy Delay, David Cerone, and Mischa Mischakoff; and began her studies of historical performance practice with Albert Fuller, Jaap Schroeder, and Stanley Ritchie at Aston Magna. She has been invited as guest lecturer and clinician at workshops and music schools throughout the United States, Europe, and China and currently teaches historical performance practice at the Mannes College of Music in Manhattan and violin at Princeton University.

[1] Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, 2nd ed., trans. Edward R. Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 237–41.

[2] Ibid., 119.

[3] Giuseppe Tartini, *Treatise on Orchestration*, trans. and ed. Sol Babitz (Los Angeles, CA: Early Music Laboratory, 1970), 9.

[4] Quantz, 163.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Judy Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners* (St. Albans, UK: Corda Music, 2000), 34.

[7] Quantz, 238.

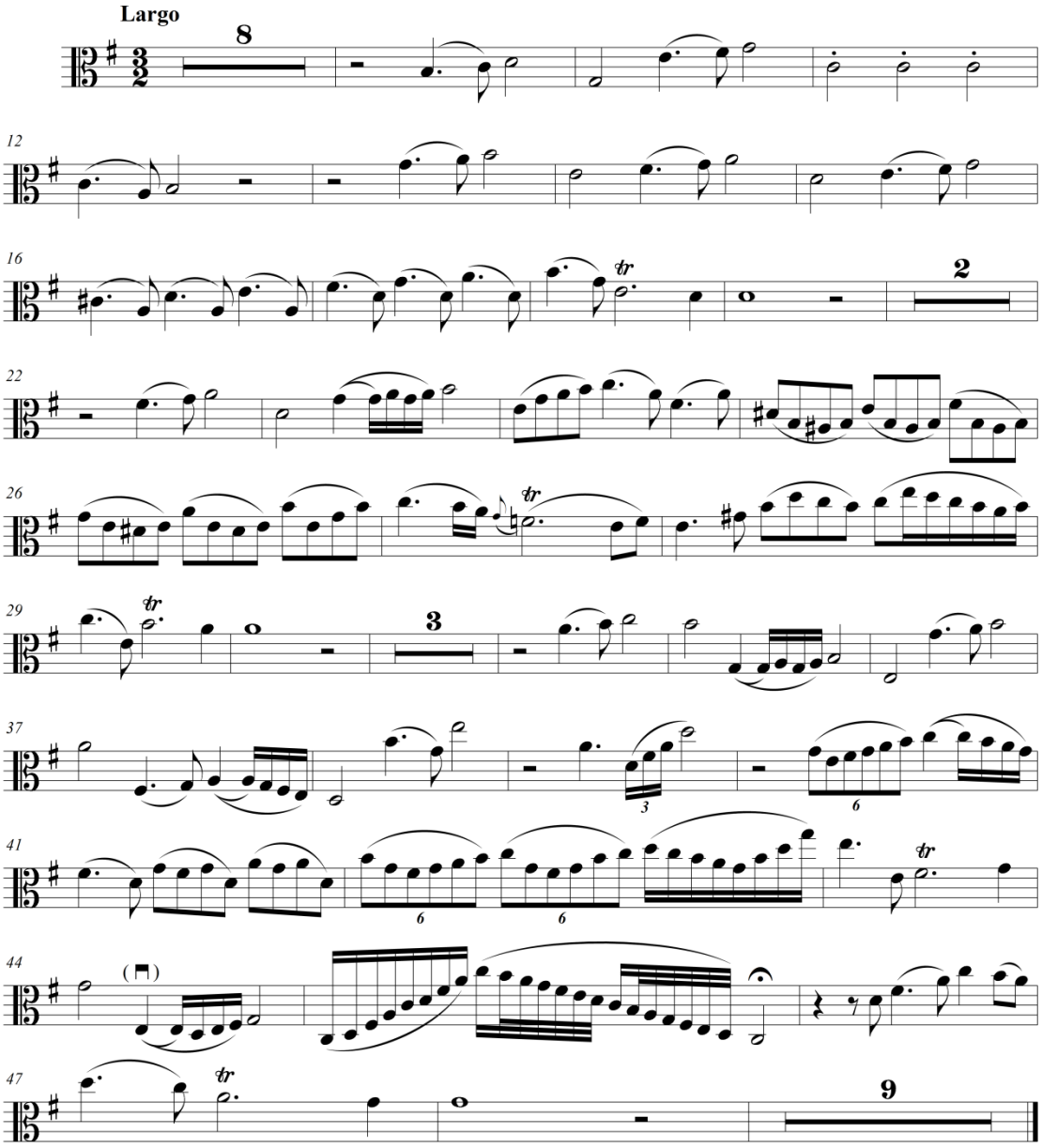
[8] Ibid., 99,120.

Concerto In G Major

Movement I

Solo Viola

G. P. Telemann
Ornamentation by David Miller



Concerto in G Major

Movement III

Solo Viola

G. P. Telemann
Ornamentation by David Miller