

Scintillating baroque ...

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Conductor from the continuo



... *Serious fun*

French Baroque Dance Music Style Sheet

Essential reading: Muffat “Florilegium”, F Couperin “L’Art de toucher le Clavecin”, D’Anglebert (harpsichord transcriptions of Lully, table of ornaments).

This style sheet is modelled on Muffat.

1. **Tuning** The assumption is meantone. Thirds are pure (so much narrower than on piano), fifths are narrow, fourths wide (more than on piano). Easy mnemonic: sharps low, flats high. Muffat’s comment warns you not to make the thirds **too** low – in meantone, the pure third sounds great, a bit too high is acceptable, but a bit too low really hurts.
2. **Rhythm** Pay great attention to rhythm, insist on scrupulous accuracy and ensemble. Good rhythm for early music in general means concentrating on the *tactus*, the big slow “one in bar” beat, not the little ticky beats of the small notes.

Inside the big beat of the *tactus*, be aware of the hierarchy of “good” and “bad” beats. In triple time, make the first of the bar a little longer, the other two lighter and shorter. Watch out when the first of the bar is a rest, it should be a *long* rest.

Watch out for notes that are given short articulations that you don’t “fall into the hole” you have made, ie don’t arrive early on the next note. Muffat mentions this.

The big *tactus* beat (usually minim or dotted minim, but use common sense if the piece is notated in very long or very short note-values) is steady and never changes. The crotchets get the “good/bad” hierarchy. The quavers, when notated equal, are swung=*inegal*. This swing, just as in jazz, is linked to the character of the piece. A vigorous fast dance (bouree, rigaudon) gets a vigorous strong swing. A moderate dance (gavotte, minuet, courante) gets a moderate, lilting swing. A slow solemn dance (passacaille, chaconne) gets a subtle, noble swing. Only a comic piece or a soldiers’ march has equal quavers.

Dotted quavers are usually sharply dotted. Overtures are sharply dotted. Dotted crotchet plus quaver is usually equalised to the prevailing swing in other parts/elsewhere in the bar. Smaller notes (semiquavers) fit in with everything else going on.

If the part moves with big jumps rather than with stepwise motion to adjacent notes, the quavers are played equally. However, note that this does not apply if the jump is between one phrase ending and the next beginning: that’s just the normal way for phrases to end/begin. You will find sharply dotted quavers in the same piece as equally notated, lightly swung quavers: you should make a difference between the way you play the two different notations. But you should not end up with equally notated quavers performed swung and unswung simultaneously in different parts.

Each dance has a characteristic rhythmic unit: crotchet crotchet MINIM for Gavotte (3 4 1). Dotted crotchet quaver CROTCHET for chaconne (2 3 1). Crotchet MINIM for Sarabande (1 2 3). MINIM crotchet crotchet for Pavane (1 2 3 4). Make this basic pattern steady and clear. Muffat says that one should recognise immediately which dance-type is being played.

3. **Bowing.** Down-bow on down beat of every bar. Downbow for good notes, upbow for bad notes. Lots of re-takes. Lift the bow off the string a lot. See Muffat.

Shape long notes with a “late bloomer” slow-developing sound and a little silence of articulation after the note. Bring vibrato late on such long notes. Match long notes to a long arpeggio on continuo instruments (start arpeggio on beat, NOT before)

Don't use vibrato at all on short notes. Don't bang short notes, especially the final note of a phrase when short and unaccented. Don't arpeggiate short notes on continuo instruments.

4. **Scoring.** The basic texture is 5 part, but works well as 2 parts (treble and bass) or 2/3 parts (two trebles and bass).

For a small ensemble, if you don't have violas (etc) for parts 3 and 4, it works ok to have tune and bass only. If you have two or more melody instruments, in trio sections, drop one of the trebles down to 2nd treble, have the continuo play part 3 which is temporarily “the bass”. In 5-voice sections, have all melody instruments on treble together. If you have suitable instruments, try to get parts 3 and 4 to be equal in sound (recorders on both parts, or violas on both, or both on both).

Muffat warns not to neglect the inner parts. This is a warning against excess in the common practice of putting **lots** of instruments on the treble. But putting **quite a lot** on treble, relative to other parts, or missing out lower parts in a small ensemble, is authentic and effective. Muffat just warns you not to go too far.

It's worth finding good violas – as Muffat says. The parts are really interesting, for once.

You can score the vocal parts in similar fashion to the instrumental parts.

5. **Ornaments** There are complex rules for choosing where to add ornaments and which ornaments to add. See Muffat.

Lully notates only a few ornaments, and only with a + sign. You have to use Muffat to find all the places where ornaments are needed, and to know which to use in each place. Use D'Anglebert's harpsichord transcriptions of Lully to see how many ornaments there really should be, and to check you have followed Muffat's rules correctly in choosing which kind.

The golden rule for playing ornaments is to start them **on** the beat (not before – take care with this) and to match the length of the ornament to the length of the note. A short note takes a short, crisp ornament. A long note takes a long, slow ornament. Typically, there should be a long auxiliary note, leant-on strongly, without vibrato – then decrescendo on the trill – then let go early to leave a silence of articulation before the next note. Getting trills to sound right is a big part of the sound of this music, because there are so many trills!

General

Although the style is full of surface detail (ornamentation, inegal especially), in the end it is dance music. There should be a catchy melody, solid bass, strong rhythm that makes you want to dance.

I found these to be the priority comments that needed most frequent repetition:

- Rhythmic accuracy, not falling into the holes, rhythmic units.
- Trills with long auxiliary, decrescendo trill, gap afterwards
- Vibrato late on long notes, no vibrato on short notes

Have fun, and good luck!