

**Complete Works for Viola da Gamba of Orazio Bassani
by Joëlle Morton**

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Orazio “*dalla viola*” Bassani was an instrumentalist and composer, and especially celebrated for his virtuosity as a player of the viola da gamba. Born in the northern Italian city of Cento, c1550, he spent most of his career in service to the Farnese family, centred at Parma.¹ From an early age, Orazio’s talent was highly lauded. The first record of his employment is from December 1570, when he was sent to Pesaro to perform as Duke Ottavio Farnese’s representative at the festivities celebrating the wedding of Prince Francesco Maria della Rovere and Lucrezia d’Este. In September 1574, he and his brother Cesare (also a viol player) officially joined Duke Ottavio’s chapel at Parma. (The Farnese household later also employed Orazio’s nephew, Francesco Maria Bassani, though nothing else is known about him.) During this period, the wealthiest ruling houses of the City and Papal States enjoyed a healthy rivalry, competing with each other to see who could have the most lavish, prestigious and opulent lifestyle, through their patronage of the arts. Duke Ottavio was especially passionate about instrumental music and supported a sizable roster of more than 20 musicians including the likes of Cipriano de Rore and Claudio Merulo. That Orazio was especially valued is evident since he consistently received the second highest salary of all the Duke’s musicians. In 1582, he went to Rome to work as part of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s household and in 1586, traveled with the Cardinal to Brussels. During those years he received a handsome annual pension of 300 gold *scudi*. After this, he returned to Parma to the employ Duke Ranuccio Farnese, with only one other known sojourn to Rome in 1599 before his death in 1615. There are documents showing that during the 1580s and 90s, rival households in Mantua and Ferrara tried to lure Orazio and Cesare to leave their Farnese employ, but to no avail. Orazio’s would therefore appear to have been a lifelong career that was mutually satisfying to both artist and patron.

Aside from the eleven virtuosic ‘solo’ pieces contained in this volume, only one other work by Orazio has made it down through the ages: a 5-voice madrigal *Poi che ne prieg' ancor*² and little additional information exists to shed light on Orazio’s life and specific activities. As a result, it’s easy to trivialize his work and to consider him a marginal figure, when so many other big developments were taking place in the north-Italian musical world at exactly this time. But there are several clues suggesting that Orazio was widely regarded as an important member of the Northern Italian musical community. First, his name appears in the prefaces to several notable publications by other composers (for example Sigismundo d’India and Vincenzo Bonizzi), where his prowess as performer and composer is lauded.³ Second, his name appears in the 1601 charter

¹ See Niwa, Seishiro. “Duke Ottavio Farnese’s Chapel in Parma, 1561-1586.” Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of International Christian University, 2002.

² London, British Library, Add. MS 31393, ff. 9r-11v.

³ The commemorative dedication to Duke Ranuccio in Sigismundo d’India’s *Le musiche* of 1609 reads: “I dedicate these new compositions to Your Highness...reflecting my infinite devotion to your regal person, although my devotion is not yet enough for the generous nature of your most illustrious fathers [Dukes Ottavio and Alessandro] who had masters of music in protection:

list of members for the *Accademia degli Intrepidi* at Ferrara, which was one of the earliest centres for the flowering of the *stile moderno* and for new musical theatre (opera).⁴ Thirdly, circa 1586, the Farnese family commissioned a portrait of Orazio by a highly respected/sought artist, Agostino Carracci.⁵ In the painting, Orazio is alone tuning a lute (surely meant as a symbol of his harmonious spirit), with an open sheet of music in front of him (likely a symbol for his ability as a composer), and he wears an aristocratic ruff around his neck. While portraits of musicians from this time are not uncommon, what is unusual here is the simplicity of the portrayal. This is surely a commemorative depiction of a respected and beloved member of the household. And last, but not least, Orazio's solo music is of an unparalleled complexity and difficulty, which itself reflects that his abilities as a player were indeed of an extraordinarily high level. At the same time, the nature of his writing is on the very forefront of the creation of the new monodic style, where extremely florid solo lines were set distinctly apart from a simplified form of harmonic-based accompaniment. Orazio's works are the first elaborate division style pieces where a simplified, continuo-esque, bass line was provided.

The sources:

Orazio's instrumental music is known from two primary source manuscripts. Neither is in Orazio's own hand, and in fact both manuscripts are posthumous, dating from the years shortly after his death. The first, L-BI Add. ms. 30491 is thought to have been copied c1617 by Luigi Rossi.⁶ This 53-page compilation represents works by artists with whom Rossi had studied or been associated in Naples before his departure for Rome in 1620.⁷ Rossi included two pieces for *viola bastarda* by

Cipriano de Rore, Fabrizio Dentice, Claudio da Correggio [Merulo] and Orazio della Viola [Bassano]. These men all achieved superb excellence." Even ten years after Orazio's death, his influence was still memorable and connection to him was given as a credential, as attested by Vincenzo Bonizzi in the preface to his 1626 *Alcune Opera*: "I was inspired so much that these may be called products based on the talent of Oratio Bassani dalla Viola, unique and most famous one. He gave me much advice and instruction of music when I was young. He demonstrated his particular taste, while I was accompanying his divine performance... He said several times to me and to others that he had never been accompanied so well by anybody but by me."

⁴ Claudio Monteverdi was also directly associated with the *Accademia* at this time; his *Libro Quarto* of madrigals was dedicated to them in 1603. Orazio's reputation and connection to this institution would indicate that he was seen as a distinguished colleague among the big movers and shakers of the day, ones who were at that very time pushing the boundaries and forms of musical genres and harmonic language. The instrumental music that is left to us from Orazio's pen should be considered as part of that forward-thinking movement.

⁵ The oil on canvas painting, 54 X 42 cm, now located in the Museo nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples, depicts an almost life-size Orazio from the waist up, holding and tuning a Renaissance bass lute, with a ruffled sheet of music (as yet, unidentified) on the table in front of him. It is a realistic portrayal, and there is no extraneous detail to suggest the painting was created as decoration, or to indicate that its message was moral or allegorical.

⁶ Grateful thanks to the British Library, London, for permission to publish.

⁷ Orazio's connection to Naples is so far otherwise unconfirmed, but the Neapolitan theorist Scipione Cerreto mentions an "*Oratio detto il Violone per antichita Napolitano*" in his *Prattica musica*, published 1601.

Orazio, as well as an additional incomplete division style piece of uncertain authorship⁸. The pieces by Orazio are both provided with an unfigured accompanimental bass line, labeled "*partimento per sonare*." The second manuscript source, I-Bc C.85 (Olim Cod. 089:13) is a notebook that bears the inscription "*Lezioni di contrappunto*" and its contents were compiled between 1620-22 by Orazio's nephew, Francesco Maria Bassani.⁹ The first 17 pages are simple counterpoint rules and exercises, but the remainder of the volume documents ten virtuosic works for unspecified instrument(s): nine are by Orazio, and one by Vincenzo Bonizzi.¹⁰ Many of these pieces are currently in print with an erroneous attribution to Francesco Maria,¹¹ but indications at the end of most of the pieces in this manuscript make clear the compositions are by Orazio. They were most likely copied for study as mature examples of division-style writing, or for Francesco Maria's own use as a player.

The repertoire:

Of the eleven known works by Orazio, two are treble divisions on polyphonic vocal works, six are bass divisions on polyphonic vocal works, one is divisions on all voices of a polyphonic vocal work and the remaining two are relatively short '*toccate*' for bass instrument with accompaniment. All of the melodic lines are extremely florid and virtuosic and exploit a very extensive range, even where they remain faithful to the outline of a single voice. Six of the nine division style pieces are based on pieces of vocal polyphony that are fairly well known (that were also used as the basis for divisions by other composers), but the remaining three are on pieces not otherwise known as models for divisions. One of these is particularly noteworthy: the lovely 6-voice madrigal '*Nasce la gioia mia*'¹² by Paolo Animuccia has not previously been published in any modern form, and deserves to be known in its own right.

Instrumentation:

⁸ Two names appear in the manuscript with regard to this setting of *Nasce la pena mia*: Francesco Lambardo and Giovanni de Macque. The piece is clearly in a different style and considerably less virtuosic than the works by Orazio, and in any case, the setting is incomplete.

⁹ Grateful thanks to the Biblioteca del Liceo Musicale di Bologna for permission to publish. The fact that Francesco Maria was Orazio's nephew is clear because on several of the pieces he inscribes attributions such as, "*Rotto dal Sig. Orazio Bassani mio cio. Io Francesco Maria Bassani copiato il sud[detto]*." (Divisions by Mr. Orazio Bassani my uncle. I, Francesco Maria Bassani copied the above.)

¹⁰ The Bonizzi work is divisions on "*La bella e netta ignud'e bianca mano*" and it also appears in Bonizzi's publication *Alcune Opere* of 1626.

¹¹ Jason Paras, for example, in *The Music for Viola Bastarda* (Bloomington, 1986), lists them all under Francesco Maria's name. A very few of the pieces bear no attribution, but because the writing style is distinctive and there is no other evidence to suggest that Francesco himself was active as a composer, I believe they can and should all be attributed to Orazio.

¹² The texted madrigal exists in a single manuscript, I-Rli/ Musica M14 f.99-100; I am grateful to the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana in Rome for permission to publish, and especially grateful to Luca Marzetti for assisting me in obtaining a copy. The date of this manuscript is unknown; it is a compilation of approx. 120 sixteenth century madrigals and chansons by a wide variety of well-known composers. The madrigal also appeared (reduced to five voices) in a version intabulated for lute, in both printed editions of Vincenzo Galilei's *Fronimo Diagolo* (Venice 1568 and Venice 1584).

These pieces exhibit an extraordinary three and a half octave compass. Only two pieces bear any kind of instrumental designation; "*Susanna un giorno di Oratio per la viola bastarda*" is notated at the top of the solo part in L-BI Add. ms. 30491, and *viola bastarda* is similarly prescribed for *Cara la vita mia* in the *tavola*. The overall *ambitus* of Orazio's works reflects the need/possibility for several different sizes/tunings of instruments. First and foremost is a large member of the viola da gamba family, the G violone, since some of Orazio's writing requires low GG's and low AA's. These pitches are not available on any smaller instruments¹³ and the upper extent of the lines precludes their being played by a larger one! The pieces that require G/A violone by virtue of their low notes also ascend to high d", so there should be no doubt that this large member of the viol family was used as a virtuosic solo instrument. However, several of the pieces that descend only to low AA will be found to 'lie better' on an A violone. (More on this subject, below.) The 'standard' bass viol in D is suitable for several of Orazio's pieces that exploit a range of D to a", but of course these works also fit on a cello or bass violin. There are no indications that these pieces 'must' be played by a member of the viol family, although Orazio's renown as a player of the viol might suggest that as a logical first choice. Interestingly, the treble divisions exploit a much lesser range (from d to b") and they essentially fit within Orazio's bass viol range if one extends the upper *ambitus* by just one note. However, the fast moving passages in the treble divisions do in fact lie in a higher register than one observes in the specifically bass viol pieces. A tenor viol (or viola) would be seem relatively comfortable (and especially so if one tuned it in A instead of G), but a treble viol (or violin) would also prove adequate, albeit less virtuosic.

Another detail that deserves comment is Orazio's choice of mode/key. The two works from L-BI (*Cara la vita mia* and *Susanna*) both appear in a mode/key that is different from the original polyphonic madrigal or chanson setting on which they are based; in both cases, Orazio's divisions are notated in a mode that is a P5th higher than the original model. Furthermore, their accompanimental lines are notated entirely in tenor clef, a 'little clef' (*chiavette*), which was sometimes employed to indicate that the pieces were meant to be realized in transposition. As mentioned earlier, this manuscript is not in Orazio's own hand. So it is impossible to determine if Luigi Rossi is responsible for the choice of modes/keys, or if Orazio himself composed them that way, either to be played by a smaller instrument (i.e. likely a bass viol), or to be transposed at sight by a G violone fingering the piece exactly where it lies on a bass viol, which would then 'return' the piece in its original key. For this current edition, those two pieces are being presented in both modes/keys so that individual players can make their own choices about which instrument to use.

As an overview to this collection, allow me to summarize a few details:

1) The two works in L-BI, *Susanna un giorno* and *Cara la mia vita*, are both in modes that have been transposed a P5th higher than their original vocal models. As they stand in the manuscript, they would fit on a bass viol (going down to its bottom low D), but if transposed back to keys of the original vocal models, they necessitate a G violone (going down to its bottom low GG). Being fingered in exactly the same place, they are equally well suited and equally challenging to either instrument so long as the correct mode/transposition is used.

¹³ The date and regional origin of this repertoire completely rules out the possibility of the 7-string bass viol. And in any case, the music calls for low GGs, which would not be obtainable on a 7-string bass.

2) In I-Bc the *Toccata per b quadro* exploits a range from AA to a' and its low *ambitus* necessitates a violone. In its true mode/transposition, this piece lies most comfortably on an instrument tuned in A. But knowing that some modern players will be more comfortable on a G violone, it is presented in this edition both in its original key, and in a version transposed a whole tone, so that players may compare the two, and take their pick.

3) In I-Bc, there are three pieces, *Carita di signore*, *Io son ferito* and *Toccata*, that do not necessitate pitches below a bass viol's standard 6-string range, but that otherwise still fit acceptably within the upper range that Orazio has established in pieces that require the larger/lower violone. These pieces are therefore reasonably accessible on either bass viol or violone (without transposition). One might argue they will be 'easier' on a bass viol... but then again I doubt anyone will be picking Orazio's works for its simplicity!

4) Notated as separate, albeit consecutive, pieces in I-Bc, *Carita di signore* is the *seconda parte* to *Signor mio caro*, and both pieces appear in the same mode as Cipriano de Rore's original vocal settings. However, the lower range that Orazio utilizes is different in each piece. *Signor* requires a violone since it descends to AA. *Carita*, on the other hand, only descends to D. (Both pieces ascend to a'.) Viewing these two works as a related pair, it stands to reason that *Carita* 'should' be played on a violone, even though it fits on a bass viol. (And further, one might additionally argue they lie even better on a violone tuned in A.)

5) Two pieces, *Nasce la gioia mia* and *Così le chiome*, from I-Bc seem to specifically require a smaller bass instrument (such as a bass viol, cello or bass violin) and both of these works are in the correct tonality of the original vocal model.

6) Orazio's bass divisions can be seen to exploit a range of three octaves and a perfect fifth. So a final puzzle has to do with the instrument he might have intended for the treble divisions, *Lasso che mal accorto* and *Vergine bella*. These are each florid embellishments of treble lines of a vocal model, and are notated entirely in soprano clef. Somewhat surprisingly, these pieces exploit a much lesser range than Orazio's other works and the highest written note is only b". Note that this upper *ambitus* is only a single tone higher than what was called for in the bass division pieces; so perish the thought, but it is possible that these treble divisions might really have been intended to be played on a bass instrument! Failing that, then why not a tenor viol, or viola? The modern vogue among players currently completely overlooks discussion of these instruments, but this repertoire perhaps makes a convincing case for their use. And use of treble instruments (treble viol or violin) would certainly downplay the virtuosic character that can be seen to pervade the rest of Orazio's writing.

A summary of the eleven works by Orazio is provided below, with ranges and an indication for the size viols to which they are suited.

About the Accompaniment and This Edition:

The ability to create and improvise *passaggi* was considered a main component of instrumental instruction and technique, and was especially cultivated by Italian players during the period of *circa* 1550-1650. Orazio's writing may be characterized as extremely elaborate ornamentations based either on a simple harmonic progression, or on the lines and framework of a preexisting vocal piece. Because this repertoire was primarily composed prior to the standardization of a basso continuo team, it is generally accepted that these pieces were most often accompanied by an

instrument or instruments that played all of the lines of the entire original madrigal/chanson. However, for the two pieces in L-BI Add. ms. 30491, simple bass accompaniments were provided (though without figured bass), which would seem to imply that they were to be 'harmonically' realized by a keyboard or plucked instrument. For these works (*Cara la vita mia* and *Susanna un giorno*), the bass lines are almost exact *basso seguente* replicas from the original madrigal/chanson. Following this example, *basso seguente* accompaniment lines (based on the original vocal models) have been generated for each of the other remaining works. But full settings of the vocal models are additionally included here, both as an option for accompaniment and as a study reference. Players may make their own decisions about which form of accompaniment to use. *Editorial accidentals have been added to the solo parts so that they accord with the original vocal setting. **Apologies for the use of ledger lines and avoidance of C clefs; in order to make these pieces friendly to a variety of sizes and types of instruments, only bass and treble clefs have been utilized.

Orazio's works and their instrumentation:

| Ambitus | Title | Instrument possibilities: |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| f - b" d - a" | <i>Lasso che mal accorto</i> <i>Vergine bella</i> | treble, tenor or small bass treble, tenor or small bass |
| D - g" D - g" | <i>Così le chiome</i> <i>Nasce la gioia mia</i> | small bass small bass |
| D - a" D - d" D - d" | <i>Carità di signore</i> <i>Io son ferito</i> <i>Toccata</i> | small or large bass (no transposition necessary) small or large bass (no transposition necessary) small or large bass (no transposition necessary) |
| D - a"/GG - d' D - f"/GG - b flat | <i>Cara la mia vita</i> <i>Susanna un giorno</i> | small bass, or large bass (in transposition) small bass, or large bass (in transposition) |
| AA - a' | <i>Signor mio caro</i> | large bass |
| AA - a'/GG - g' | <i>Toccata per b quadro</i> | large bass (in transposition if G violone is used) |

Some possible choices of instruments:

treble = treble viol, violin

tenor = tenor viol, viola

small bass = 6-string bass viol, cello, bass violin

large bass = G or A violone