

MASTER'S THESIS

Theory and practice: controversies in Rameau's theory of harmony and thoroughbass practice

Yau, Shek Fung

Date of Award:
1998

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

**Theory and Practice:
Controversies in Rameau's Theory of Harmony
and Thoroughbass Practice**

YAU Shek Fung

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

December 1998

Hong Kong Baptist University

TH
M. PHIL
1998YT

Abstract

During the seventeenth century, the fast growing number of thoroughbass signatures caused mnemonic problems for performing musicians. Although many thoroughbass theorists tried to solve the problem, promising fewer signatures than their predecessors, the result remained complicated. The issue of seeking simplicity also caught Rameau's attention. In order to reduce the vast amount of signatures, Rameau developed an idiosyncratic theory of harmony, which was primarily based on acoustical theory, in his *Treatise on Harmony* (1722). In the *Treatise*, Rameau advocated a novel insight to solve the problem by generalizing figures through thoughtful investigations of intervallic structure, chord entity and harmonic succession. Rameau's principles had sparked many discussions and disputes during the Baroque Era on the practice of harmonic understanding. Thoroughbass instructors and musicians highly criticized the inadequacy and imprecision of his theory because his insight left far behind the actual use of harmonies among Baroque musicians. By revealing the discrepancies between thoroughbass instructors' practice and Rameau's speculative harmonic theory, I hope readers will gain a better understanding of the inter-relationship between harmonic and linear aspects in the music of the Baroque period.

Table of Contents

Abstract	.....	i
Acknowledgements	.....	ii
Table of Contents	.....	iii
List of Figures and Examples	.....	iv
Introduction	.....	1
Chapter One		
Thoroughbass Signatures during the 17 th and 18 th Centuries	.....	4
Chapter Two		
Disparate Viewpoints of Treatises	.....	12
Chapter Three		
Rameau's Principles on Harmony	.....	20
Part A: Intervallic Structure	.....	21
Part B: Chord Formation	.....	28
Part C: Theory of Inversion	.....	38
Part D: Cadence Types and Harmonic Progression	.....	48
Chapter Four		
The Rule of the Octaves	.....	67
Chapter Five		
Major Discrepancies between Rameau's Harmonic Theory and Thoroughbass Practice	.....	90
Summary	.....	116
Appendix	.....	120
Select Bibliography	.....	121