Bach performance in Italian “instructive editions”

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Introduction

Performance practice studies are normally intended as efforts aiming at the reconstruction of how a work was played by its own author and/or at the time of its composition. However, we may include within this discipline also the analysis of the evolution in habits and taste as regards performance of specific authors and styles. This is normally achieved by comparing and studying recorded performances; nonetheless, other methods are also possible, at least as complements. Therefore, we propose studying the so-called “instructive editions” (IEs) with this purpose: these editions, prepared by famous teachers and/or performers, complement recording analyses inasmuch that:

1) they represent the editor’s interpretative aims, his artistic ideal, whereas live performances may contain both strokes of genius and missed objectives;

2) they propagated the editor’s ideals, establishing or consolidating performance styles and fashions (especially when used during education, e.g. at Conservatories).

Survey on IEs’ spread

Thus, IEs are both cause and effect of performing trends; their influence is proportional to their spread. The present research has therefore two consequential objectives:

a) determining the most commonly used Bachian IEs in Italy;

b) comparing them, to find their similarities and differences.

One of the most fruitful methods to ascertain which IEs were/are most commonly used in Italy was a survey, involving a sample of 315 Italian pianists (2007-2008). Its results (some of which are rather surprising) demonstrated that even nowadays, although Urtexts (Henle, Bärenreiter and Wiener Urtext) are the most employed both in teaching and performance, many IEs are widely adopted (see graph 01).

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1 Recordings made when editing was not yet possible testify in fact “only” about a particular performance of a particular performer, and they are not totally satisfactory as witnesses of general performing trends and fashion.
The criteria determining a student’s or a teacher’s choice of a particular edition are even more unexpected, as shown by graph 02.
Although fidelity and authenticity are very important for the pollees, practicality, availability, explanation of the embellishments and good fingerings are determining. Analysis of data regarding which edition the pollees would suggest as first or second choice to their students, and about which ones they use personally showed that many pollees would advise pupils to actually study on an IE, and to keep an Urtext on their music stand for a comparison. Surprisingly, moreover, IEs are used more by the interviewees than by their students. This means:

1- IEs are decreasingly used;
2- Interviewees are “faithful” to editions used when students.

Since they will probably recommend IEs to their students, however, use of IEs diminishes rather slowly.

Editors in theory and practice

Analysis of editorial prefaces and statements showed that editors of the most used Bachian IEs normally agree on putting textual fidelity and authenticity first, to help students both to model their performance style according to the editor’s ideal, and to avoid stylistic errors and capricious performance. Comparison of their statements with their editions showed however that what one preaches is not always what one practises.

Comparing Busoni and Pestalozza’s editions of Bach’s Inventions\(^2\), Pestalozza’s looks decidedly more “modern” than Busoni’s: no slurs, sober “breaths” ( | ), and just a metronome marking instead of Busoni’s trilingual tempo indications. Moreover, Pestalozza’s dynamics are in square brackets, and realized ornaments are in small print. However, this “edition on the autographs” (i.e. a “quasi-Urtext”) clearly remains an IE, as it has fingerings, metronome indications, dynamics and articulation.

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\(^2\) Pestalozza’s is one of the IEs declaring more precisely its sources and their variants.
Lesser differences divide Mugellini’s from Casella’s edition, as shown in the 5th Symphonia, whose rich ornamentation and lyrical quality are particularly stimulating. Both editors propose tempo and character indications, and Mugellini adds also a metronome marking; both have (similar) fingerings, as well as dynamic and expression indications. Ornaments are realized identically\(^3\); the appoggiatura on b. 2 is four times longer in Mugellini. Melodic parts are similarly slurred (with a “breath” in Mugellini), whereas bass is very different: Mugellini adopts a “Romantic” articulation with slurs covering whole bars, whereas Casella’s non legato is philologically more correct. Casella’s IE is therefore slightly more “modern” than Mugellini’s, although it doesn’t correspond to his declarations on “an absolutely reliable text, based on the autographs and on the great Bach-Gesellschaft edition”.

\(^3\) Realization is put by Mugellini in separate staves and small print (conventional signs in the main text), while Casella omits them and inserts the realization into the main text.
In his 1952 WTK edition, Montani stated that every detail “was examined [...] and [...] established according to the least debatable aesthetic and pedagogical rules” (i.e. his own taste?); in his 1960 Partitas’ IE, he complained about heavily edited Bachian IEs, enthusiastically praising the “German fashion” of Urtexts. His Partitas are actually much “cleaner” than his WTK (a “conversion”?); there, except pedalling, all other typical IEs features are present (tempo, metronome, extra-detailed articulation, dynamics, fingerings...).

To compare the most influential Bachian IEs, we developed a particular method of graphical analysis, integrated through a detailed quantitative and qualitative study of all kinds of performance elements, highlighting each editor’s particular “idiom”, his peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, as well as their common qualities and shared views.

For WTK I/8 we compared Busoni⁴, Mugellini⁵, Casella-Piccioli⁶ and Montani’s⁷ IEs. Both Busoni and Mugellini were published abroad by Breitkopf⁸, while both Casella/Piccioli and

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⁸ This is interesting: first, a German company trusted Italian pianists with two different editions of the WTK within 15 years; second, the first two most commonly used IEs were imported; third, their influence on the following ones may have been even increased by their “reliability” (combination of German publishing with Italian “interpretation”).
Montani’s were published by Milan-based companies⁹, in consequence of the 1930 Conservatory programmes.

Prefaces are included in Busoni¹⁰ and Casella/Piccioli’s¹¹ editions. As Hamilton rightly points out¹², this Prelude brings Busoni’s theories to a contradiction: whereas he seemed to be a “complete opponent of the striving after cantabile effects¹³” in his discussion of the Prelude WTK I/6¹⁴, in the present case he goes so far as to state that “the soprano ought fairly to «sing»”¹⁵.

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⁹ This is also significant, considering Milan Conservatory’s special role of Milan Conservatory in the educational experiments of the last 250 years and in the elaboration of the Conservatory programmes.

¹⁰ “This deeply emotional movement, emanating from the inspiration of a devout dreamer, is Bach’s prophetic forecast that in the fullness of time a Chopin would arise… The execution of long-breathed melodies on the pianoforte is not only difficult but positively unnatural. In no case can a tone be evenly sustained, and a swell is still less possible; yet these are the two indispensable conditions for the rendering of cantabile passages, and impossible of fulfilment on the piano. The connection of one sustained tone with a following tone is perfect to a certain extent only when the second tone is struck with a softness precisely corresponding to the natural decrease in tone of the first... While the tone of the pianoforte, by reason of the instrument’s mechanism, naturally increases in power and sonorousness in the descending scale, the melody requires, on the other hand, that intensifications as a general rule, shall be accompanied by an increase in tone power when ascending; - but beyond a certain pitch the duration of the piano tone becomes so short, that pauses and breaks in the melodic continuity are absolutely unavoidable. It is the function of the touch to overcome these difficulties and to counteract these defects as far as may be. To avoid plagiarism of various remarks made by Thalberg on this point, I quote literally a few passages from the preface to his L’art du chant appliqué au piano. This course appears to be the best, in view of the fact that these remarks are noteworthy, and yet already forgotten”. BUSONI, Well-Tempered Clavichord, vol. 1. Original English translation from the Schirmer’s 1st Edition.

¹¹ “The fitting adjective for this prelude – and I am fully aware of its value – is «sublime». Rarely indeed, in the music of all times, is it possible to find such complete and perfect examples of what the philosopher calls «contemplated sentiment», that sentiment which is the privilege of art and which is far above human sentiment. Bach seems once again to have discovered all the tragicalness of an unusual and gloomy tonality, so wonderfully suitable in this case to the mystical and religious atmosphere of this masterpiece which has a purity of line that is truly Grecian. Though I have no wish to be prosy, I should like you to imagine this piece as a slow and solemn procession (biblical perhaps) with a rhythm marked by the chords of the harps, on which a recitation of a pathetic and dramatic nature is played. Therefore, there must be a rhythmic severity in the majestic measure of the chords, but freedom of declamation in the melody. Another useful comparison might be made with Giotto’s “Descent from the Cross” in the «Scrovegni» chapel at Padua. The arpeggio indications [...] are all original Bach” [original translation].

¹² Cf. Kenneth L. HAMILTON, After the Golden Age, cit., p. 163-166.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “The chase after an ideal legato is a relic of that period in which Spohr’s violin method and the Italian art of song held despotic sway over the style of execution. There obtained (and still obtains) among musicians the erroneous notion, that the instrumental technic ought to be modelled after the rules of singing, and that it more nearly approaches perfection, the more closely it approaches this model so arbitrarily set up for imitation. But the conditions – the taking [of] breath, the necessary joining and dividing of syllables, words and sentences, the difference in the registers – on which the art of singing is based, lose greatly in importance even when applied to the violin, and are not in the least binding to the pianoforte. Other laws, however, produce other – characteristic – effects. These latter, therefore, are to be cherished and developed by preference, in order that the native character of the instrument may make itself duly felt. In proof of the staccato nature of the pianoforte, we instance the enormous development which has come about, within a few decades, in wrist technics and octave playing”. Busoni, Well-Tempered Clavichord, vol. 1. Original English translation from the Schirmer’s 1st Edition.

¹⁵ Busoni, Well-Tempered Clavichord, 1:48.
Busoni
Casella - Piccioli
Mugellini
Montani

sentito

Busoni
dolcissimo
una corda
pp dolcissimo
pp
PP

poco espress. sentito

mf
ges.

pp

voller

poco f

f

dim.
con larga espressione

dolente mit breitem Ton

p

mf

(p)

dim.

mit breitem Ton

ten.
Busoni:

3 corde
marc.
cresc.
steigernd
cresc.

oder ohne Pedal

non legato

senza Pedale

sempre f, largamente
più deciso
ma sempre largamente

 senza Pedale

non legato
Observations

Agogics
All editors propose tempo indications and all but one add metronome markings too. Mugellini’s con larga espressione (b. 14) is not unquestionably a tempo indication, but both Busoni and Casella/Piccioli indicate largamente at b. 20; at b. 27 Busoni adds a ritenuto. For the cadenza, Casella writes “espress. liberamente” at b. 35 (r.h. solo), poco cedendo at b. 36, a tempo at b. 37. At b. 35 (r.h. solo) Mugellini writes un poco largam., adding a rall. at b. 39 (final cadence).

Tempo vs. Ornamentation
Full notation of embellishments\(^\text{16}\) and metronome markings\(^\text{17}\) allow comparisons of ornamentation/tempo relations. At b. 4, Casella/Piccioli and Montani propose a 4-note, and Mugellini an 8-note trill, although the difference regards its duration, not its speed\(^\text{18}\). All editors begin the trill with the principal note, and so do both Montani and Casella/Piccioli at b. 14 (A), thus repeating the preceding note, whereas for Mugellini the trill continues the preceding beat’s figuration; therefore, he covers it entirely with a slur, whereas phrasing is missing in the other IEs:

Montani proposes a short mordent, suitable to his quick tempo\(^\text{19}\), with a “stop” on a syncopated note; Casella/Piccioli rest on the first note followed by a 4-note trill connected with its conclusion. At b. 15, however, all but Busoni realize the trill “à la Montani”\(^\text{20}\). At b. 19, the trill is the first part’s climax and conclusion, and is rather uncomfortable to play (r.h.’s weakest fingers):

\(^{16}\) Through fingerings in Casella/Piccioli.  
\(^{17}\) Casella/Piccioli, 76; Mugellini, 84; Montani, 116.  
\(^{18}\) Montani's lasts 1/8, Mugellini's 1/4 (unclear in Casella/Piccioli). Cf. b. 8, 10, 12: Montani suggests a short mordent and Mugellini a long trill.  
\(^{19}\) 1.5 times faster than Casella/Piccioli.  
\(^{20}\) This cannot be due to his influence (his edition is the most recent), but probably to technical reasons (r.h. “blocked” by C and A): this confirms that technique is often more determining than theory for ornamentation.
Busoni and Casella/Piccioli start with the principal note, Mugellini and Montani with the upper. So, similar to before, only Mugellini proposes a long slur (from the two last notes before the trill to its conclusion). Casella/Piccioli quote Busoni’s realization, adding triplet-signs\(^\text{21}\); their solution is very clear but pedantic. Montani’s is the shortest, with syncopation on the B-flat; Mugellini starts similarly but continues for a minim.

At b. 24, both Casella/Piccioli and Montani propose a 4-note syncopated trill; Mugellini prolongs it, with no syncopation; Busoni proposes two possibilities, both determined by his concept of C-A in half-staccato (unlike the others, considering them as the trill’s conclusion): 

At b. 29 (cf. b. 19), Mugellini has a long slur and starts with the upper note; Montani and Casella/Piccioli on the principal note (stop after a minim); they add a turn (bar’s end: trill lasting until then?), whereas Montani stops as usual.

\(^{21}\) Busoni may have not meant this, but a simple accelerando.
Analysis of editorial behaviour
Quantitative comparison of editorial additions gives precise feelings on their behaviour:

Indications decrease with time, from Busoni’s 191 to Montani’s 43. Casella/Piccioli is the richest of agogics and dynamic indications, and the second for expression: three typical elements of “Romantic” Bachian performance. Pedal markings are indicated only by Busoni (richest articulation) and Mugellini (slurring). Therefore, Busoni is very detailed and prescriptive in all elements, but also very “precise” in pronunciation (many articulations); Mugellini is smoother and undifferentiated, with long slurs and constant cantabile.

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Tempo</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Slurs</th>
<th>Articulation</th>
<th>Pedal / 1c</th>
<th>Expression</th>
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<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41(^{22})</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{22}\)
Dynamic trends are shown by this graph:

Common elements include:
- light beginning
- tension on b. 4 (except Montani)
- b. 12-13 mf
- b. 16-17 p
- b. 26-29(30) f
- b. 31-32 p
- b. 35-36 fff
- pp conclusion.
Montani privileges “terrace dynamics” (rare hairpins); Mugellini’s waves are the most frequent and ample; Busoni emphasizes the two climaxes, avoiding minor fluctuations disturbing their centrality; Casella/Piccioli concentrate only on b. 28-29’s peak, reached after a constant crescendo and followed by distension.

Connections between editions are identifiable as well. Casella is not secretive about his admiration for Busoni, whose edition inspires Mugellini too, although their basic concepts are opposed\(^{23}\). Montani is influenced by all others: his peculiarity is a “wish for modernity”\(^{24}\). However, many of Busoni’s most interesting features were progressively reduced to a standard Bach performance: his subtle and differentiated articulation was replaced by long slurs (often connecting on a same note) or by uniform staccatos; his analytical concept was not imitated, and only his conclusions were enthusiastically adopted. Surprisingly, his tempi are near to those suggested by modern musicology; they were paradoxically “Romanticized” by editors like Casella/Piccioli.

Mugellini’s edition is the most Romantic, with frequent indications about dynamics (apparently dictated just by his personal taste), abundant phrasing and extended slurs, crossing themselves very often and creating an undifferentiated legato. His articulations are frequent but not very original (mostly staccatos and appoggiatos).

Casella/Piccioli’s edition is the most “instructive”\(^{25}\): their tempi are always the slowest, ornamentation is the least rich and complicated; phrasing and articulation are standardized and “unquestionable”. All IEs had pedagogical purposes, but, in same cases, they weren’t the principal (Busoni’s edition aimed at suitability for professionals too), whereas Casella/Piccioli’s IE is conceived as a textbook. Following Busoni’s indications, one obtains an original performance (although the originality will be Busoni’s); following Casella/Piccioli’s, the result will be an extremely acceptable performance, undisputable by the exam’s panel.

Montani’s version is, from one side, an even further standardization of the preceding; from the other, it is the first step towards urtexts. He starts reducing the editorial additions, provoking both greater sobriety (“purer” text), and performance standardization. His tempi are noticeably quicker than the others – a sign of a change in taste towards modern performance practice.

Pedal is missing in all editions but Busoni’s\(^{26}\); Prelude WTK I/8’s “Romantic” quality provokes also a more flexible treatment of tempo, especially in the older editions.

All prefer symmetry to variety for articulation and phrasing: elements with the same structural function must be performed always the same. Mugellini does so by simply covering repeated elements with long slurs; Casella/Piccioli suggest subtler (and shorter) phrasing and slurring (inspired by bowed instruments), but maintain it constantly.

If variety was forbidden in articulation and slurring, it was created through dynamics and (rarely) agogics. Sometimes dynamics were strictly determined by the piece’s form (climaxes or section changes); in other cases, it had no other grounds than the editor’s creativity.

Bach’s embellishments are almost always respected, but their realizations are arbitrary and irregular: Busoni’s are quick and rich, starting mostly with auxiliary notes; Casella/Piccioli’s are slow and rhythmically regular; Montani prefers short and quick mordents with stops and syncopations.

In general, then, editors tried to solve the problem of piano performance of Bach music, and suggested proposals for a consistent and coherent interpretation. Their editions are made by pianists for pianists: the viewpoints suggested by musicology or by practice of earlier instruments do not belong to their perspective, and their editions are “genuinely” pianistic. They witness the coexistence of a performance tradition, for which Busoni had capital importance, and of an evolution in taste and style. It follows both directions of a “trivialization process” of performance\(^{27}\) and to “modernization”, leaving progressively out some typical elements of Romantic Bachian performance.


\(^{24}\) Quickest tempo; lesser indications; terrace dynamics instead of waves.

\(^{25}\) It was the first new edition of Bach’s WTK after the 1930 Conservatory examination programmes (Montani’s, appearing later, has some philological pretence and less copious additions).

\(^{26}\) Mugellini indicates pedalling for WTK I/8, but this is exceptional in his whole edition.

\(^{27}\) After Busoni’s enthusiasm and personality, performances tended to standardization, especially at Conservatories and in consequence of Bach’s music’s spread in the examination programmes.