

**Georg Muffat on Performance Practice:  
the texts from *Florilegium Primum*, *Florilegium Secundum*,  
and *Auserlesene Instrumentalmusik*.**

A new translation with commentary

Edited and translated by David K. Wilson.  
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Review by Kris Worsley, Manchester

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The complex diversity of Georg Muffat's musical inheritance causes many problems for the modern performer. The significance of his studies in France (with Lully) may be weighed up against that of his later affinity to Austria and Italy. This book provides an extremely useful translation of Muffat's own instructions on the correct approach to his works. David K. Wilson (who was handed the project by the late Thomas Binkley) sets out to provide a complete, self-contained guide to Muffat's writings on performance practice, prefacing the translations with a biographical sketch of Georg Muffat, and following them with a commentary which discusses the implications of these writings on Muffat's Intentions, Instruments, Pitch and Temperament, Techniques, German Performance Practice, and Performance Settings.

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The thoroughness of the study does help to clarify the confusion that all too easily results from Muffat's own cosmopolitan style (Wilson admits that „*questions can be asked about how representative of French music of the seventeenth century Muffat's writings actually are*“ (page 119)). The biographical sketch that opens the volume stresses the importance of the political circumstances that framed Muffat's life, from his beginnings in Savoy, his presumed studies with Lully in Paris, and his further travels to Vienna, Salzburg and Rome and his eventual settling in Passau. This emphasis on Muffat's travels brings a welcome sense of clarity to the problem of the composer's stylistic diversity and enlightens many of his comments in the texts in a most direct way.

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The translations themselves are unabridged, and include full transcriptions of Muffat's title pages and dedications. Wilson has attempted to remain faithful to all versions of the text that were published in German, French,

Italian and Latin, by providing a translation of the German version in the main body of the page, with alternatives from the other language versions appearing in the margin. He explains in the preface that this format was chosen in order to provide a text that was less cluttered with markings and interpolations. Nevertheless, the format does lead to a large number of untidy gaps in the text, which often breaks off in the middle of a sentence in order to provide space for the editor's notes at the side of the page. While these fragmentary alternative readings (often no more than a single word) are aligned horizontally with the line of text to which they relate, its exact position within that line is not specified, and often could take any one of several positions. In some cases, the alternative readings provided are easy to account for, although in many cases, they could relate to various different clauses within the sentence, and in some cases, rather strangely, they simply do not fit anywhere in the text. Anyone wishing to cite alternative readings in the translations will also have to refer to the original sources to be sure that the alternative is used correctly, since this volume's layout does not adequately provide this information.

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Further criticism may be made of the poor presentation of the musical examples within the book. The object of studies in performance practice is surely not only that of instruction and of the presentation of hard facts that should be taken into account when making performance decisions, but also to convey the context in which the notes were set down by the composer, and in which they are to be interpreted by the performer. It is, therefore, slightly disappointing to find Muffat's musical examples reproduced in poor-quality, computerised print which departs from the affluent style of the language that is carried forward in Wilson's translation.

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The writings themselves offer a unique perspective on many performance issues in Muffat's music. Muffat's intention was to provide textual prefaces to the musical works of his *Forilegium Primum*, *Florilegium Secundum*, and *Auserlesene Instrumentalmusik* in order for German performers unfamiliar with the French manner of violin playing to perform the music with credibility, encouraging „*higher advancement of the art of music in our Germany, its improved progress and further brilliance*“ (page 21). Muffat does also state that German performers had previously „*robbed the works of their correct tempi and graces.*“ (page 16) Nevertheless, his comments are not specific to musical works which they accompanied in the first edition, and give interesting performance perspectives on French and Italian music of his era, as well as inadvertently giving many clues to the practices of his contemporary German performers.

The text to *Florilegium Primum* (1695) provides only a very brief summary of issues relating to the performance of repeats and choice of tempi. In the latter case, Muffat's advice provides a clear account of the relative tempi required in an Overture, Prelude, Symphonie, Ballet, Gavotte and Bourée depending on whether or not the movement is marked *Alla breve*. The contrast between the French and Italian styles is also addressed here as Muffat remarks that, „*when the measure is marked in 2 and is taken very slowly in two, the value of the notes is nearly the same as it would be with the Italians under the sign C, where the measure is marked Presto and divided in four*“ (page 17). Muffat continues throughout these writings to provide a number of such illuminating comparisons between the French, Italian and German styles of the high-baroque era.

The second text, *Florilegium Secundum* (1698), offers a much deeper discussion of five separate performance issues for violinists: fingering, bowing, tempo, style (concert practice, number of instrumentalists, choice of instruments), and ornamentation. Within the presentation of the text here, we begin to encounter further unfortunate inconsistencies. Those portions of the text which appeared in Latin in all of Muffat's four-language originals are thankfully given in the original Latin, although, in one case, the Latin is followed by a translation in the main body of the text (page 32), in another with a translation appearing as a footnote (page 13), and in another without any translation being provided at all! (page 29). Nevertheless, the importance of Muffat's information should not be overlooked by such matters of poor presentation in this modern edition. While Muffat's instructions on violin fingering offer only small clues to the correct use of intonation, he offers an extended and detailed account of the correct use of the bow. Here Muffat opens with some surprising remarks on the correct bow-hold, stating that the largely French manner of „*holding of the bow for the violins and violas [...] pressing the thumb against the hair and laying the other fingers on the back of the bow*“ was also used by most German musicians (page 33). Muffat then proceeds to give a comprehensive account of the correct use of the bow within the Lullian style, though, as before, many useful hints concerning the practices of Germans and Italians are also provided. Generally, the bowing provided in the examples results in a much clearer (and, at times, predictable) sense of rhythm and pulse, extending the principle that Muffat sets down at the outset that a note which appears on the first beat of the bar „*should always be played down-bow. This is the most important and nearly indispensable general rule of the Lullists, upon which the entire style depends, as well as*

*the main difference that distinguishes it from the other styles*“ (page 34). While exceptions to this rule are provided at a later point within Muffat’s explanation, he goes on to show instances in which this rule holds strong in French music, when it would be contradicted in German and Italian playing. In one very interesting example, Muffat provides the melody of a minuet, in which the diverse rhythms are bowed in two contrasting ways. In the first example, Muffat implies that the passage would be bowed in exactly the same manner by German and Italian players, with syncopations and other diverse rhythmic characteristics of the melody accentuated by the use of downbows. In the second example, subtitled „*Lullian*“, Muffat demonstrates a much simpler bowing, with a strong down-beat provided by a down-bow at the beginning of each bar and further, more subtle techniques with which to articulate the natural pulse of the music, rather than the rhythmic characteristics of the individual melody, which he implies is more important in the German style.

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In the third section of *Florilegium Secundum*, on tempo, Muffat’s comments once again indicate a longing for simplicity within the French school of violin playing. Beyond the remarks on the importance of keeping a steady tempo, Muffat maintains the importance of keeping all beats of the bar even, rather than rushing forward. Further to this advice, he mentions works in duple time, such as the Gavotte, in which the even-numbered beats should be „*rather more held back than rushed*“ (page 43). The appearance of such statements appears at first to contradict Muffat’s own rules on maintaining a steady tempo, although this is not strictly the case. Muffat’s principles indicate a style of playing in which each beat of the bar is to be valued by the performer, and in which metrical weight is provided by positive emphasis on the stronger beats of the bar, rather than negative emphasis on the weaker beats. The formula Muffat sets out for Notes Inegales is characteristically simple, as the composer states that groups of smaller note values should be played „*as if all the odd-numbered notes were given a dot.*“

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In section four, entitled *More on the Lullists’ Practices That Serve Our Purpose*, Muffat provides some valuable information regarding performing conventions of his day. While some of these statements are nothing more than personal opinion, the great geographical breadth of Muffat’s stylistic knowledge leads to some important observations such as that „*The pitch to which the Lullists tune their instruments is generally a while-step lower, and in theatrical productions even one-and-a-half steps lower, than our German pitch.*“ Altogether, Muffat outlines four different concert pitches,

stating that he favours the choral pitch for his own music. Each of the four pitches described by Muffat is explored by Wilson in the latter part of the book, with additional insights into the exact pitch which each of Muffat's terms refers to, as well as a useful description of their use (ample footnotes are given for those who wish to explore these matters further in the modern literature). Also included in Muffat's discussion are references to the instrumentalists and their instruments. Here the composer states that, „*a somewhat more narrowly-made viola would serve better for the Violetta part, which the French call haute contre, than a small violin.*“ (page 45). Muffat's sometimes ambiguous references to instruments leads to an admirable discussion by Wilson in the latter part of the book. While much controversy remains about the appropriate application of instruments, Muffat's comments certainly provide a number of interesting clues to fuel the debate.

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In the final part of *Florilegium Secundum*, Muffat discusses the correct use and interpretation of ornamentation within the Lullian style. Here he outlines twelve different ornamental figures, which he considers to be „*the most important and essential*“ within the Lullian style, followed by a detailed discussion amounting to ten rules of their application, which, according to Muffat contain „*the entire Lullian manner of ornamentation [...] in brief form.*“ Most interesting here are a set of six cadential formulas „*in the Lullian manner.*“ Thereby Muffat provides numerous alternative realisations of typical melodic cadence formulas; an invaluable source to the modern performer. Most impressive is the range of the realisations here, which are suitably provided for works of differing natures.

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The final translation included in the volume, *Auserlesene Instrumentalmusik* (1701), addresses the subjects of „*The Number of Musicians and Instruments, and their Characteristics*“, and „*The Manner which is to be Observed in the Performance of these Concertos.*“ While the content of these chapters is, once again, geared towards the concertos by Muffat, originally published in the same volume, the external implications of Muffat's comments are numerous.

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In the first part of this treatise, Muffat states that the works published in *Auserlesene Instrumentalmusik* may be performed by a minimum of three people: the „*indispensable trio*“ of two violins and basso. He goes on to describe the proportions in which any other available musicians may be added to this trio, beginning with two violas, which may be added to the principal parts. With the introduction of different instruments into the

ensemble, Muffat encourages the transposition of his works into new keys in order to alleviate difficulties in certain passages.

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With regard to tempo, Muffat favours the Italian manner, „*in which passages marked with the words Adagio, Grave, Largo, etc. are taken much more slowly than our [German] musicians would play [...]. However, those marked Allegro, Vivace, Presto, Più Presto, and Prestissimo are taken much livelier and faster.*“ (page 76) *Auserlesene Instrumentalmusik* concludes with a discussion of the issues regarding internal repeats within the works originally published in that volume.

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David K. Wilson's six closing essays provide a commentary to Muffat's writings, highlighting the important issues within the texts. These essays are supported with many substantial quotations from the Muffat's writings, though references guiding the reader to the relevant passages within the translation are sadly omitted (the same is also true for the introductory chapter). Nevertheless, Wilson displays a clarity of thought, depth of knowledge, and close acquaintance with the modern literature that enables the essays and the treatises to gel in an impressive unity: Thomas Binkley's original intention that the translation should be of great use to performers and scholars alike is effectively fulfilled.

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Despite many untidy features and inconsistencies within the presentation of this volume, Wilson has provided the modern performer of Muffat's works, and indeed of works from the high-baroque era in general, with access to three treatise of primary importance, and an extremely informative insight into some of the issues that are of primary importance in the performance of this music.