

## Le Port de voix

One of the most significant *agréments* in 17<sup>th</sup>- to 18<sup>th</sup>-century French vocal music is the *port de voix*, and it was one of the first ornaments that should be learnt.

After one has learned to make these ornaments [tremblement], which can be used for all kinds of passages, he should learn to perform *ports de voix*.  
(Mersenne 1636)<sup>1</sup>

*Port de voix*, which has the connotation of ‘carrying the voice’, is now mostly realised as an appoggiatura that gives extra emphasis and expression to a word in the *air*. However, Sally Sanford states in her 2017 article “A Re-Examination of *port de voix* in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries: Possibilities in Vocal Performances”, that *port de voix* is often oversimplified by modern performers:

Too often the multiple possibilities for realizing the *port de voix* in performance have tended to be overlooked by modern performers, even by those who specialize in baroque performance... The *port de voix* is one of the more complex of the French *agréments*, because it simultaneously ornaments the harmony, the melody, and they rhythm, while enabling shading and inflection of the text.<sup>2</sup>

Sanford believes that *port de voix* is more complex than we thought, because this ornament adds a lower neighbour note before the ornamented note, and this note goes against the written harmony and melody. With this additional note, the rhythm of the music will also be altered, since it takes time from the previous and the main note.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I find it necessary to study this ornament in detail. In this section, I will examine and compare the *port de voix* of Mersenne, Bacilly and Montéclair.

### Definition – What is *port de voix*?

Bacilly is the only author who clearly defined *port de voix* in words as “the movement made by the voice from a lower note to a higher note”. He gave four clear instruction for singers who attempted to perform the ornament:

1. The sustained lower note,
2. The repetition of the lower note,

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<sup>1</sup> Mersenne 1636, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Sanford 2017, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sanford 2017, p. 1.

3. The repetition of the upper note,
4. The sustaining of the upper note after it has been repeated.<sup>4</sup>

Bacilly was also the only author who suggested that there were other different ways of performing the *port de voix*. Apart from the above-mentioned ‘true’ *port de voix*, it is also possible to vary among *demi-port de voix*, *port de voix glissé* (or *coulé*), and *port de voix perdu*. Nevertheless, the definition of these variation by Bacilly is not very clear, as it is not clear whether all these belonged to one type of ornament or are simply a variation of the same one. We can have a look at the following definitions of *demi-port de voix*, *port de voix glissé* (or *coulé*), and *port de voix perdu* by Bacilly:

However, in the *demi-port de voix*, which is not entirely complete, there are only two considerations; to wit:

1. The sustaining of the lower note previous to the movement,
2. The *coup de gosier*, which repeats the upper note but does not sustain it in any way.

The *coup de gosier* in this case is performed with less force and more delicacy than in the true *port de voix*. The *demi-port de voix*, which is not complete in itself, can be performed in two ways; they are:

1. Sliding over the *coup de gosier* and performing it without any force of accent, and yet as in the true *port de voix*, still preserving the time value and length of the upper note. This I call the *port de voix glissé* or *coulé*, as you wish.
2. The other method is to reduce the time value of the upper note and give almost all the time to the note which precedes it. This I call the *port de voix perdu*, of which I will give examples later on in this treatise.<sup>5</sup>

From the above definition, it is clear that *port de voix glissé* and *port de voix perdu* are two ways of performing *demi-port de voix*, and they are different *agréments* from *port de voix plein*. However, in his later description, he suggested that there are three ways of using the *port de voix*:

In this air the three different methods of using the *port de voix* from one note to another immediately above it can be clearly seen... He may wonder

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<sup>4</sup> Bacilly 1668, pp. 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 65.

whether to omit it in favour of a *tremblement*, whether to perform a strong *port de voix*, (by this I mean accenting it forcefully with the throat; i.e., ‘roughly’ for the benefit of the untutored), whether to perform in lightly and legato as in the *port de voix doux*, whether he ought to use merely a *demi-port*, or finally, whether he ought to use the third type of *port de voix* in which the upper note is cut quite short rather than sustained although it is still repeated...<sup>6</sup>

Although he said that there were three different methods of using the *port de voix*, Bacilly did not clearly explain what those were, because he then listed four ways of performing the ornament. He even gave a new name *port de voix doux* as a type of *port de voix*, which I would relate to *port de voix glissé*. Later in his explanation, he again said there were three types of *port de voix*:

On the word ‘partez’, all three types of *port de voix* could be performed between the *mi* and the *fa*, but the most appropriate would be either the legato one (*glissé*) or the shortened one (*perdu*), *not* the fully accented *port de voix*, which in this case would be too harsh.<sup>7</sup>

Concluding all his definitions, I would say that there are in total four types of *port de voix* in Bacilly’s theory that are categorized in the following ways:

1. The complete *port de voix*: sustaining the lower note, repeating the upper note with force (*fermeté*) and sustain it afterwards.
2. The *demi-port de voix*: a variant of the *port de voix* that begins like the complete *port de voix* but does not sustain the upper note afterwards and is executed with more delicacy.
3. The *port de voix glissé*: a variant of *demi-port* that slides in legato from the lower note to the upper note.
4. The *port de voix perdu*: a variant of *demi-port de voix*, but the upper note is shortened and is barely graced.

In view of the fact that this detailed distinction of different types of *ports de voix* is not commonly heard in modern performances, I find it is meaningful to restudy how it was performed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>6</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 80.

### Why should *port de voix* be used?

The earliest theoretical mention of *port de voix* was by Mersenne in 1636. He wrote that it was necessary for singers to learn to perform *port de voix*, because it was what made “songs and recitatives most attractive” and made voices estimable. When the ornament was being well executed, it could move the spirits of the listeners.<sup>8</sup>

Bacilly also stated clearly that *port de voix* (and the *demi-port*) was absolutely necessary for a proper performance of the vocal music. When the ornaments were placed in a proper spot in the music, they made the singing ‘strong without being crude and sweet without being insipid.’<sup>9</sup>

It is thus clear that the authors unanimously agreed that *port de voix* was a basic ornament in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was necessary in performances, however, they had quite different explanations concerning the way in which the ornament should be executed.

### How should the *port de voix* be executed?

Mersenne, in his 1636 treatise, wrote that *port de voix* was not marked in printed scores, but a singer can realise himself the application of *port de voix*, as shown in Figure 2 (Ex. 2) below:



Figure 1: Mersenne 1636, p. 172.

But these *ports de voix* are not marked in the printed books; this one can do by putting a little dot after the note on which one begins the portamento and then adding a quarter or eighth, or sixteenth after the dot, which signifies that one must just touch the preceding tone to lead to the note following. This will be better understood from the three preceding examples [in Ex. 2], the first of which shows how the voice must be carried from *ut* to *re*; the second shows how it moves from *mi* to *fa*, and the third from *re* to *mi*, or *fa*... This should only be done where it is most suitable and in places where the *ports de voix* have some grace; and one can draw the same conclusion in regard to

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<sup>8</sup> Mersenne 1636, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 67.

the trills, roulades, accents, shakes, and decrescendos of the throat and voice.  
(Mersenne 1636)<sup>10</sup>

From Mersenne's description, in summary, the *port de voix* should be performed by adding, after the written lower note, a short lower note that 'flows' to the upper note in legato, filling up the interval without interruption.

In short, the voice flows and passes from *re* to *mi* as if it drew the *re* after itself, and continues to fill out the interval, or degree *re-mi*, by an uninterrupted movement and renders these two sounds continuous.  
(Mersenne 1636)<sup>11</sup>

We should note that the *port de voix* in Mersenne's treatise is not quite the same as our notion of an appoggiatura, since Mersenne repeats the lower note. He wrote a slur over the additional note to the main note, but not to the preceding note. Moreover, the time of the *port de voix* is taken from the preceding note instead of the ornamented note. Unfortunately, there is not much explanation provided by Mersenne for his examples, but we can have a look at what Bacilly thought about *port de voix* in his treatise, where he gave an abundant description of the ornament.

As mentioned earlier, Bacilly held that there are 4 methods of using the *port de voix*: 1. the fully accented *port de voix*, 2. the *demi-port de voix*, 3. the legato *port de voix glissé*, 4. the shortened *port de voix perdu*. Bacilly also noted that when the *port de voix* was not performed in the same syllable, the performer must insert the same note on the syllable on which the *port de voix* was performed.<sup>12</sup> Bacilly gave a clear example from Michel Lambert's *air* "Mon ame faisons un effort", how the printed version was not marked with any *port de voix* sign but was expected to be performed with it:

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<sup>10</sup> Mersenne 1636, pp. 171-172.

<sup>11</sup> Mersenne 1636, pp. 171-172.

<sup>12</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 66.

Lambert 1668, p. 5.

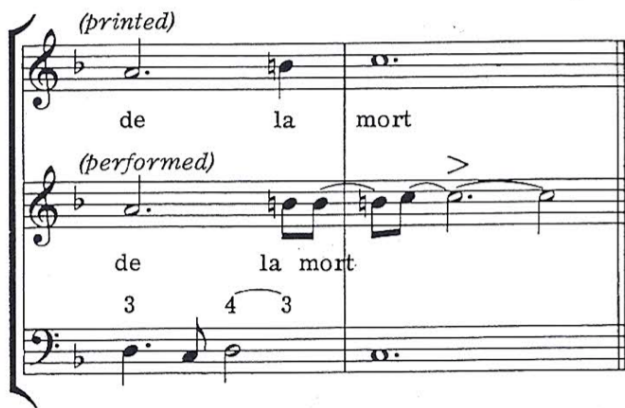


Figure 2: Bacilly 1668, p. 66.

Bacilly and Mersenne's *port de voix* are similar in a sense that they both take time from the lower note, but Bacilly's ornament also takes time from the upper note:

[...] it is necessary not only to borrow an eighth-note from the preceding syllable but also to borrow by means of an anticipation a little of the time value of the upper note, to add it to that which has already been borrowed. By this means, the *port de voix* is performed perfectly with a long sustaining of the lower note previous to the *coup de gosier*. (Bacilly 1668)<sup>13</sup>

Since the execution of *port de voix* in these two treatises are not identical, I look into Montéclair's 1736 treatise, *Principes de la Musique* and to what he said about this ornament.

Montéclair introduced eighteen *agréments* in his treatise, and *port de voix* was the second one on his list. In his description, as shown in Figure 4, he specified that "when the song rises in joint degrees, from a weak note, D, to a strong note, E, to rest on the last of these two notes, we often practice the *port de voix*; and above all, on everything when the interval is only a semitone." He also held a similar view as Bacilly, "We do not mark it in all the places where it should be done, the taste and the experience give this knowledge."<sup>14</sup> However, unfortunately, Montéclair's description for *port de voix* was not as extensive as the other two authors and he did not specify whether *port de voix* was played on the beat or before it.

<sup>13</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Montéclair 1736, p.79. Translated by myself unless otherwise specified.

## Le Port de voix.

Lorsque le chant monte par degrez conjoints, d'une note foible, D, à une note forte, E, pour se reposer sur la dernière de ces deux notes, on pratique souvent le Port de voix; sur tout quand l'intervalle n'est que d'un demi-ton. On ne le marque pas à tous les endroits où il faut le faire, le gout et l'expérience donnent cette connoissance.

Le Port de voix se marque quelquefois, par une petite note postiche, F, qui luy sert de preparation et qui prend le nom de la note forte, G, à laquelle elle se lie, et sur laquelle il faut elever la voix. On le marque aussi par ce signe, V, H. Le Port de Voix, I, est le renversement du coulé, K. Je croy que ce signe, /, seroit plus convenable que le signe, V, pour marquer le Port de voix.



Figure 3: Montéclair 1736, p. 79.

### *When should it be executed?*

It is clear that all three authors Mersenne, Bacilly and Montéclair said that the *port de voix* was not marked in printed scores, and therefore it is a problem for singers when and where to execute the ornament. In this respect, the authors shared similar views on the places of execution, that is where a note rises in the interval of a tone or semi-tone, and where it makes the song more graceful:

This [*port de voix*] should only be done where it is most suitable and in places where the *ports de voix* have some grace... (Mersenne 1636)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Mersenne 1636, p. 172.

[...] the general rule states that a *port de voix* should be used whenever the interval of a tone or a semi-tone is found between two consecutive notes unless they are in some sense exceptional. (Bacilly 1668)<sup>16</sup>

When the song rises in joint degrees, from a weak note, D, to a strong note, E, to rest on the last of these two notes, we often practice the *port de voix*; and above all, on everything when the interval is only a semitone. (Montéclair 1736)<sup>17</sup>

There was not much description about the usage of *port de voix* in Mersenne's treatise, but from the three examples in Figure 5 (Ex. 2) we have already seen earlier, we can tell where an appropriate spot is to apply the ornament. In the last example, where the voice has to sing from *re* to *mi*, and then to *fa*,<sup>18</sup> Mersenne showed that it is possible to ornament a passing note, but not necessary in a cadence.



Figure 4: Mersenne 1636, p. 172.

However, it was difficult for 17<sup>th</sup>-century singers to decide where a *port de voix* should be performed whenever they encountered an interval of a whole tone or semi-tone. Therefore, Bacilly included in his comprehensive treatise more examples of where to apply and where to omit the *port de voix*. I have summarized his guidelines in the following table:

Table 1: Bacilly's instructions on when to practice the *port de voix*<sup>19</sup>

Practice the <i>port de voix</i>	Omit the <i>port de voix</i>
1. Always at cadential points.	1. If a <i>tremblement</i> is performed.
2. Sometimes in half-cadence where there is room to put it.	2. When the note is not long enough for the ornament.

<sup>16</sup> Bacilly 1668, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Montéclair 1736, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> I am using the French solemnisation here as French authors would have done then.

<sup>19</sup> Bacilly 1668, pp. 65-82.



3. Practice the *port de voix glissé* to fill a tone with semi-tone in between.
4. With variety, using the *port de voix*, *port de voix glissé*, and *port de voix perdu* alternatively.
3. To allow the solid pronunciation of final consonants like 'r'.
4. When it is not necessary to fill the intervals. Good taste is the judge.
5. When you want to merely sing the written note.

#### *Is there any sign representing the port de voix?*

The *port de voix* was not marked in scores, as mentioned by all three authors, but Montéclair suggested in his treatise that it is sometimes marked by different signs, as shown in Figure 4, such as a small, false (*postiche*) note, F, or a sign 'V'. He suggested himself that the sign 'V' is more suitable for the ornament.

Therefore, it is possible that in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, musicians were trying to add ornamentation signs as a guideline for performers. However, these symbols were not consistent, as I will discuss in later chapters.

#### *Conclusion*

While trying to find a pattern or rule of performing the *port de voix*, I discovered that there are no strict rules. As emphasized many times by Mersenne, Bacilly and Montéclair, *le bon goût* (good taste) and experience is the judge. If there have to be rules, I would say that there are two:

1. The rule of good taste, and
2. The rule of variety in singing.

While comparing between the description of the ornaments between the three authors, we should also take into account that the ornamentation system had been changing and developing from Mersenne's time to Montéclair's time, since there is a hundred-year difference in the published date of their treatise. This is also true for all the following ornaments discussed.