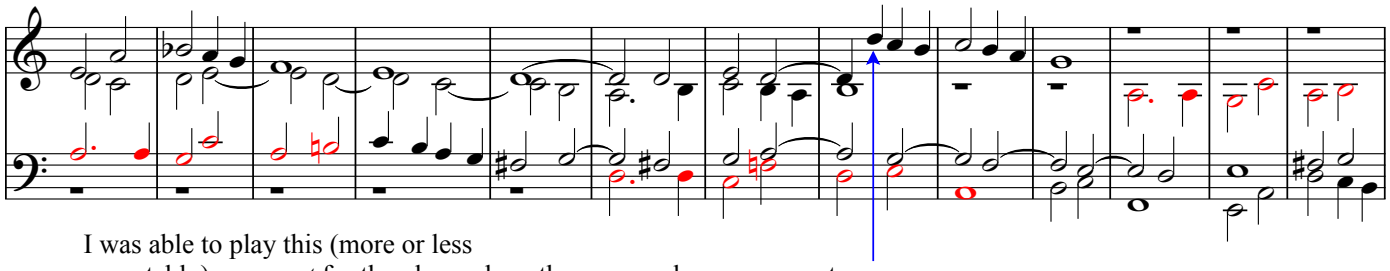
James,

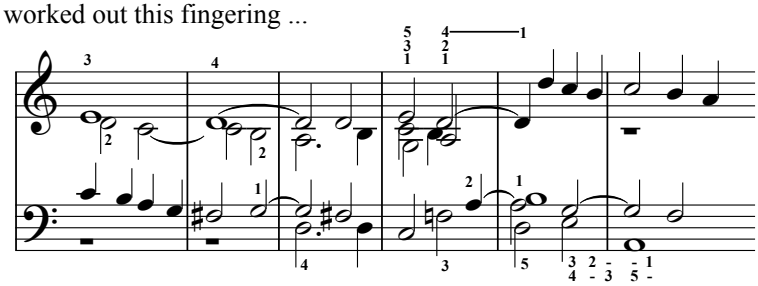
While I was working on Froberger's (organ) *Ricercare XIV*, I came across a passage with an interesting collection of difficulties. After I'd worked out a satisfactory approach, it occurred to me that it was a good example of the kind of thinking and techniques I typically apply to this kind of interpretive (or, more accurately, pre-interpretive) problem, and that it might be fun to try to get it down in some detail. It's nothing earth-shattering, just fun.

Here's the passage (I've colored the theme of the ricercare):



I was able to play this (more or less acceptably) ... *except* for the place where the soprano leaps up an octave, where I had to scramble to get the left hand onto the alto B.

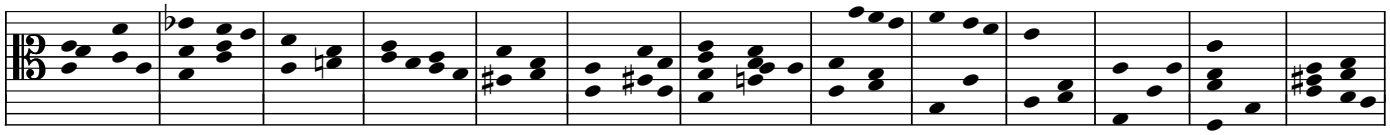
I worked out this fingering ...



... which is harder than others that are more obvious (and easier), but has the advantage of putting the head of the theme by itself in the left hand (with all the other voices either in the right hand or not played simultaneously).

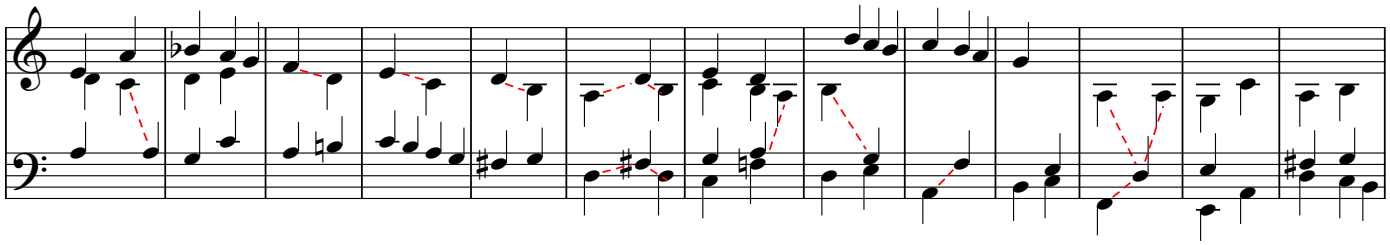
However, even with this fingering, I found it difficult, with the lines so close together (and the switching of voices from one hand to another), to make it sound like four voices.

The notation can be misleading, because it gives you lots of clues about what goes with what.
Here's how the score might look without all those clues:



(by the way, Froberger used a close spacing of the staves --- though not as close as this)
That's a somewhat more accurate representation of the pattern of note onsets that's perceived by a listener (if no special efforts are made to bring out the voices).

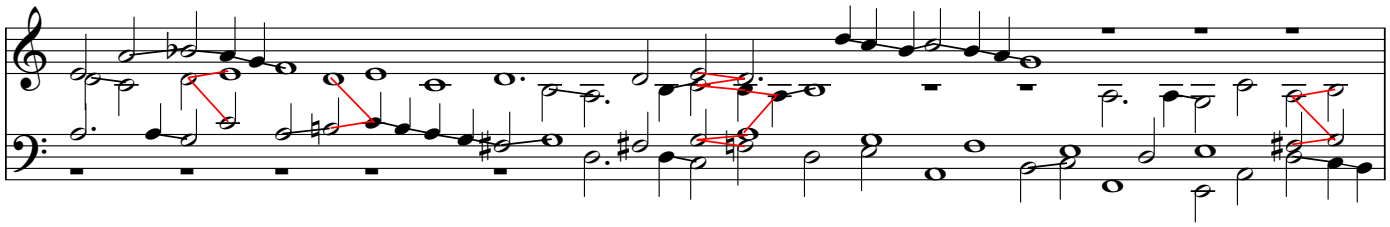
If you compare that to the same passage with the voices indicated, you can see places where the voice-hidden notation suggests melodic motion (or repeated notes within a voice) that are in reality (?) an alternation of voices:



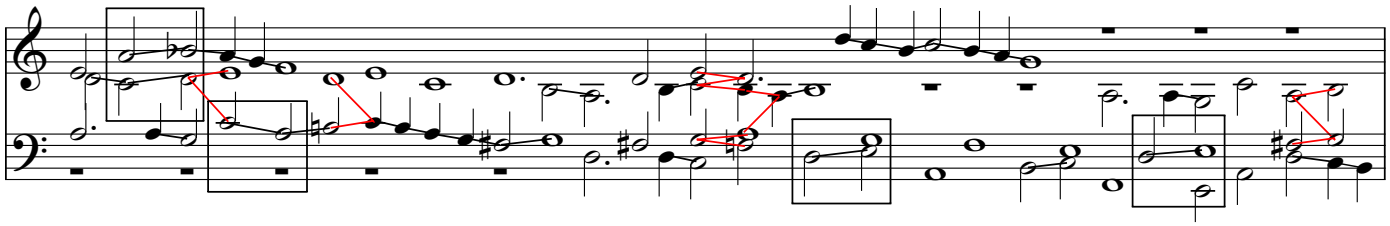
To figure out what to do, it's useful to identify places in the passage where the composition itself creates conditions that contribute to the illusion that a note belongs to a series of notes being played by a monophonic instrument.

The most important such conditions are proximity in pitch and proximity in time. Both of these are relative; in this passage, the inter-onset times within voices are 𝅗𝅥., 𝅗𝅥, 𝅗𝅥., 𝅝 and 𝅝., and inter-onset intervals within voices are 0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 12 semitones, so it's reasonable to assume that melodic motion of a whole step or less and at the speed of a half-note or faster will be heard as progressions within a voice (as long as there is no conflict from other voices).

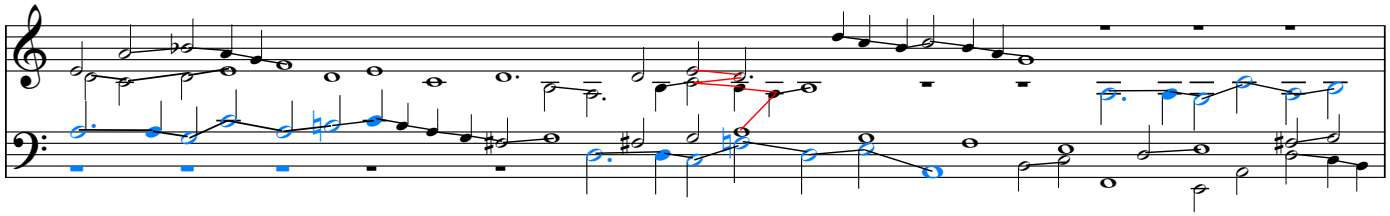
Given that, here are (1) the places where inter-voice motions are made clear by the composition itself, and (2) the places where there is possible ambiguity at the level of unison/half-/whole-step and quarter/half-note:



That's a conservative assesment; there are several places where quarter-note motion, though present in one voice, is distant enough from another voice (where there is step-wise motion) that it would not prevent the latter from cohering. Here's a revised assessment:

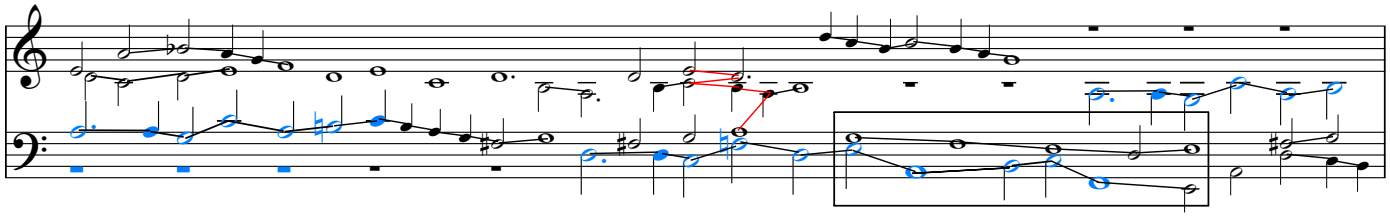


The tools at our disposal to eliminate the ambiguity are dynamics, onset timing, and note duration. Since I want to bring out the ricercare's theme anyway, I'll start by assuming I'll do that with dynamics, and see which ambiguities that resolves:

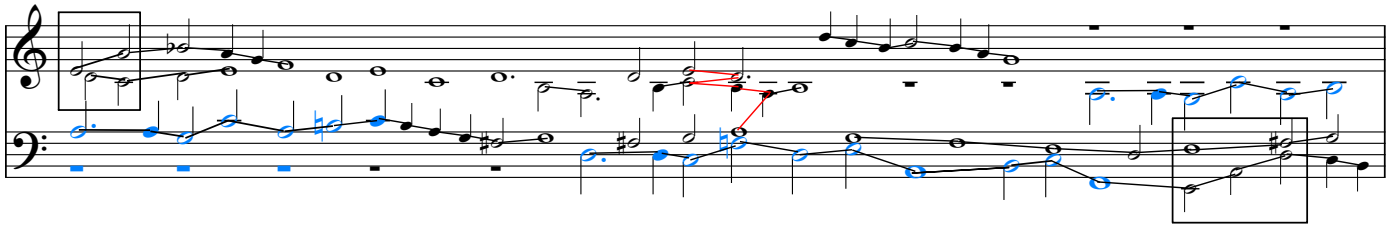


Okay, that's progress. You'll notice that some things resolve because they would have been unambiguous if not for the possible confusion with the theme, and with the theme put at a different dynamic level, it no longer conflicts.

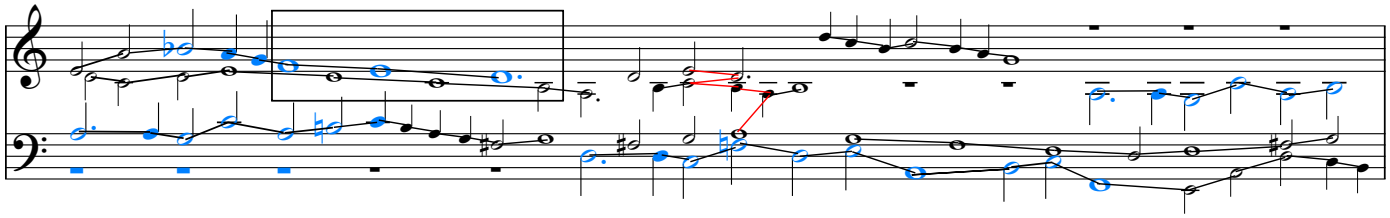
That same principle can help out in another place; if the emphasis of the bass theme is extended, the whole notes (and one half note) in the tenor voice can recede into the background together:



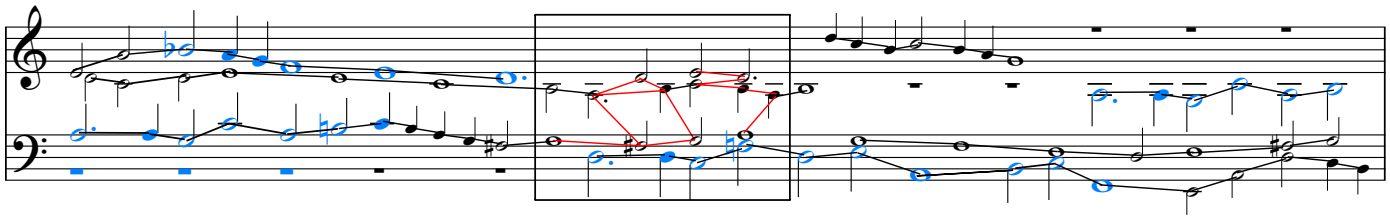
There are also a couple of places where enough of the ambiguity has been resolved that the separation of voices in pitch space is plenty to keep things clear:



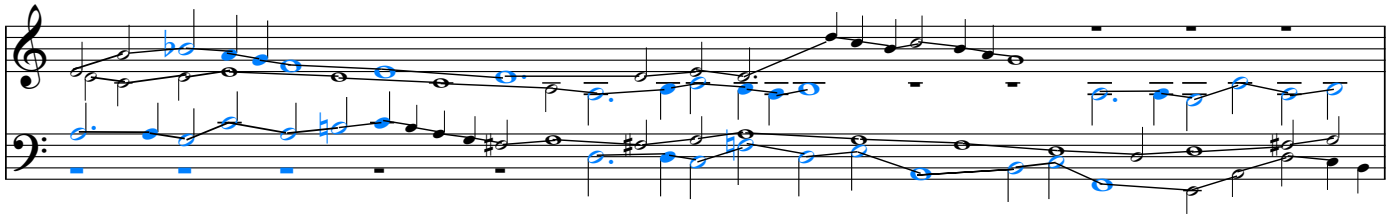
The easiest way to clear up the first remaining ambiguity, the one in the chain of soprano and alto whole notes, is to bring out the soprano and let the alto recede to the background:



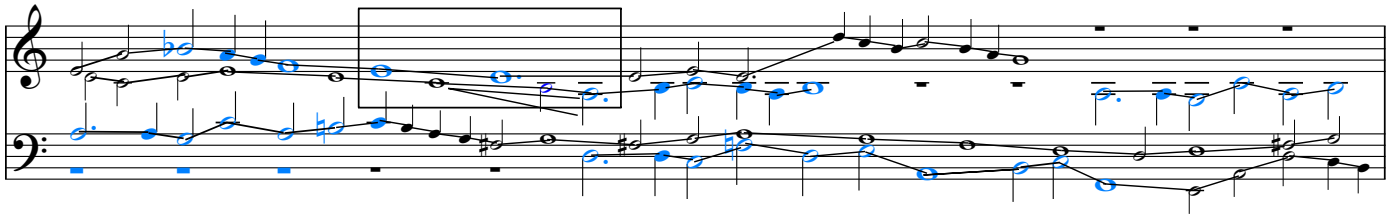
That left only that troublesome passage in the middle. There's actually another ambiguity in that passage, not at the unison/half-/whole-step level, but at the level of minor and major thirds:



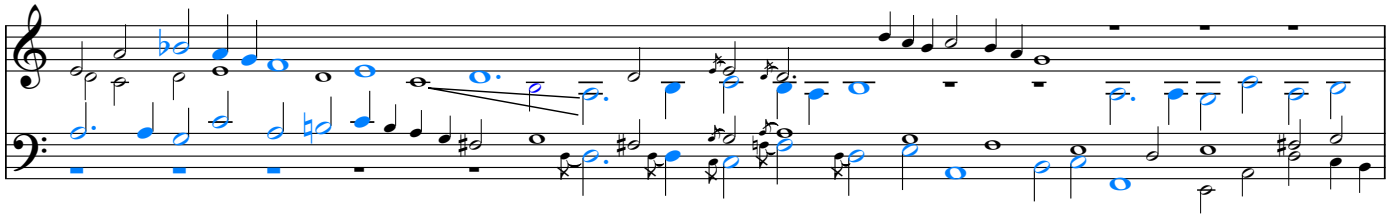
What a mess. Conceptually, the simplest way to clarify this is to bring out the alto:



However, there are a couple of problems with this. The first is the transition from bringing out the soprano to bringing out the alto. Fortunately, this can be handled with a little finesse: if the dynamic level in the chain of suspensions is gradually reduced, it's possible to play the first alto B at a level which is both quieter than the preceding soprano D, and louder than the preceding alto C, such that it is clearly the alto voice, but is also beginning a slight crescendo; this can then be followed by a greater crescendo to the A, and the roles are reversed:



A more basic problem, though, is that the bass is already being brought out at that point. There are several things about this that present difficulties. It's another voice that's being brought out, so there's competition for the listener's attention. It's the bass, which masks all the voices except the soprano to a great degree. And it has the same rhythm as the alto. To make the alto distinct, we have to bring in the heavy artillery: timing. We will play the alto slightly after the beat (notated here as the rest of the notes being anticipated):



What I found most interesting about this was how much there was to deal with in that middle passage, and how far in advance its effects percolated.

October 1-3, 2008