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Rhetoric in the Performance of Baroque Music

In *The End of Early Music*, oboist and musicologist Bruce Haynes suggested the term “Rhetorical music” as an appropriate alternative to the label “Early music” – a term that “expresses the essence of the musical spirit prior to the Romantic Revolution” (p. 12). His statements reflect the views of many ‘Early’ musicians, beginning with Leonhardt and Harnoncourt. Despite this, rhetoric receives surprisingly little attention from “outsiders” – critics, listeners, “mainstream” performers, philosophers, even musicologists – in their discussions of HIP (historically-informed performance).

This curious situation reflects a wider misunderstanding. Many “outsiders” still think of historical performance as a predominantly technical exercise, focused on means rather than ends. Richard Taruskin, one of the movement’s most influential critics (and admirers), for example, writes that HIP musicians are content with reconstructing the original sounds, insofar as these can be empirically recoverable; they are not really interested in the expressive effect that composers were attempting to achieve (*Text and Act*, p. 99).

Similar assumptions are voiced in many discussions of HIP, even by the movement’s supporters. But in reality, many HIP musicians do attempt to recover the aesthetic ideals that inspired composers and performers in previous eras. There is a dual-feedback loop at work: understanding the composers’ aesthetic ideals helps to clarify the reasons behind technical prescriptions and recommendations; at the same time, grappling with technical issues (such as historical instruments and performing techniques) helps clarify ambiguous statements concerning aesthetic ideals.

Of these ideals, the most frequently mentioned (at least for music between 1600 and 1800) is the analogy between music and rhetorical speech (i.e., the speech employed by actors, preachers, lawyers, politicians – people who aim to move and convince an audience). This analogy influences every aspect of music-making, from the compositional process to improvised ornamentations. HIP musicians noted the importance of rhetoric already in the 1960s, and rhetorical thinking became

increasingly noticeable in their performances as their technical confidence rose. This issue did, however, cause a considerable controversy within the Early Music movement.

***Figurenlehre*: Rhetoric as semantics**

Rhetorical theory, developed in ancient Greece and Rome, was revived in the Renaissance, and became a central component in humanistic education. Given its pervasive influence, it is no surprise that it affected music. Many 17th- and 18th-century theoreticians compared the acts of composition and performance to the creation and delivery of verbal oratory, with reference to the same stages: *Inventio* (the creation of appropriate thematic materials); *Dispositio* (formal organisation); *Decoratio* (ornamentation or decoration, including the application of rhetorical figures); and *Pronuntiatio* (delivery or performance). In the context of *Decoratio*, they used rhetorical terminology to describe and classify musical techniques and prominent rhythmic and melodic figures.

Since the late 19th century, a number of musicologists began to assemble what they called a *Figurenlehre* (Doctrine of Musical Figures) based on these treatises, claiming to have found a valid key for interpreting Baroque music. Initial forays were made by Hermann Kretzschmar; his student, Arnold Schering, refined and expanded on his theories, and more systematic work was done by Arnold Schmitz, Hermann Unger and others. Their views became a kind of orthodoxy; they were incorporated, for example, into the 1955 and 1997 editions of the German music encyclopaedia *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. These scholars focused their attention on *Inventio* and *Decoratio*; they argued, in particular, that *Decoratio* figures constituted a “dictionary” of musical “words”, not unlike Wagnerian leitmotifs, that governed and regulated Baroque music.

Paradoxically, the demand for restrained, austere objectivity in the performance of Baroque music arose at the same time, and sometimes even advocated by the same people. Arnold Schering indeed believed that Baroque music was rich in expressive, symbolic and semantic content, and argued that modern listeners only have a limited understanding of Bach’s musical rhetoric. He argued, however, that clarifying it is a job for scholars and program-note authors, not for performers.

Such views contributed to the emergence of the mechanical style of Baroque performance around the middle of the 20th century. Its hallmark was intense uniformity: *crescendi* and *diminuendi* were suppressed; articulation was harsh, chopped and unvaried; tempi were rigidly metronomic. Expressive neutrality and dryness became ideals. In some cases, it was claimed that the music was so intense that it could fend for itself without any help from the performers; in others, that the performers should reflect the music's admirable restraint and objectivity.

Historical performers were often accused of perpetuating this expressive neutrality; yet a primary impetus for the emergence of HIP was musicians' exasperation with this phenomenon. Nikolaus Harnoncourt, for instance, began to examine historical instruments and treatises precisely because he did not believe that Baroque music should be rendered with ascetic neutrality. Ironically, he was openly influenced by Schering's theories; he believed, however, that it is the performer, not the annotator, who should make the music speak.

In fact, Harnoncourt's position was closer to Albert Schweitzer's (whose 1908 Bach monograph predates most of the work of Schering and his successors). The *Figurenlehre* theorists were interested in Bach's arcane symbolism, seeking musical signs for abstract ideas like faith and sin in Bach's music; Schweitzer was primarily interested in Bach's emotional message, and therefore emphasised his graphic word-paintings and his symbols for human emotions like joy and grief. Like Harnoncourt, he believed these symbols have to be realised in performance; and his detailed prescriptions on how to do so are closely reminiscent of Harnoncourt's own techniques.

Schweitzer based his theories on analyses of Bach's music – he did not seek to justify them on historical grounds. The *Figurenlehre* theorists, on the other hand, insisted on establishing a semblance of historical credibility for their theories. It was as if they refused to trust their own musical intuitions without direct permission from historical documents. Their theories, in turn, served historical performers in their quest for permission.¹ As Peter Seymour (1992: 919) put it, “the theoretical justification offered by the doctrine of rhetoric surely allows the performer greater

¹ This “quest for permission” by performers is discussed extensively by Dreyfus and Taruskin.

freedom for his or her own inspiration and imagination because these can be based on discipline, not on anarchy” – and historical discipline at that.

But *Figurenlehre* theories are historically problematic. As several later musicologists pointed out, most of the figures cited in Baroque treatises designate musical techniques like *fauxbordon*, repetition, chromaticism, or imitation; with few exceptions, they were not intended to communicate extra-musical meanings. These problems have led some writers and performers to question the historical validity of the rhetorical performance style. Joshua Rifkin, for instance (in his interview for Bernard Sherman’s *Inside Early Music*, also available online through Sherman’s website), claimed that Baroque theoreticians simply used rhetorical terminology to catalogue common musical procedures and to articulate ideas that could be seen as self-evident – musical common sense.

Harnoncourt, in his book *Musik als Klangrede* (which alludes to Johann Mattheson’s description of music as *Klangrede* – oratory in sound), claims that rhetoric separates Baroque and Romantic music:

music prior to 1800 *speaks*, while subsequent music *paints*. The former must be *understood*, since anything that is spoken presupposes understanding. The latter affects us by means of moods which need not be understood, because they should be *felt*. (*Music as Speech*, p. 39)

Rifkin disagrees:

You read Mattheson, and he’s saying, Look, a piece of music has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And that’s *all* he’s saying. [...] none of this has anything to do with some different style of performance. The kind of “rhetorical” performance that we have been blessed with over the last twenty years – which sometimes milks every little gesture for all it’s worth, and finds deep meaning in rhetorical terms that really just describe standard musical phenomena – has no historical basis. (Sherman, p. 385)

Rhetoric as speech

Several advocates and practitioners of rhetorical performance acknowledge the weakness of *Figurenlehre* theories. They claim, however, that Baroque rhetorical discourse offers indispensable insights into the performance of Baroque music (a point which even Rifkin partly acknowledges). Most of these insights have more to do with expressive techniques and musical delivery than with symbolism; they can be summarised under the rubric of rhetoric-as-speech, which is generally a more

pragmatic approach than the arcane, rhetoric-as-semantics approach of *Figurenlehre* theorists.

The basic idea is that music follows the patterns of speech, and should be articulated accordingly. John Butt, for example, points out that when Baroque treatises exhort instrumentalists to imitate singers, they are not advocating long, sustained *legato* lines; rather, singers were expected to deliver words clearly and display sensitivity to metrical accents (i.e., strong and weak beats in a bar), and instrumentalists were directed towards similarly detailed articulation (*Bach Interpretation*, pp. 12-15).

Thus, most discussions of rhetoric-as-speech focus on articulation and phrasing. This has become the focal point of an atomistic theory of Baroque expression, which regards “small *figures* in the surface” as the focal point of expression and signification, and marginalizes “larger music *processes*, such as the extended crescendo or the prolonged dissonance” (Schulenberg, p. 105).

Taken to its extreme, such a formulation could support a performance style which emphasises articulation above all else. Ironically, this can also be said of the “sewing machine” style that rhetorical performers were struggling against. “Sewing machine” performances featured incisive articulation, clearly separating figures from each other – but they were also characterised by rigid tempi and dynamics, unvaried timbres, and a literalistic, mechanical realisation of ornaments. Rhetorical performers, by contrast, preach and practice variety and flexibility; articulation has become, for them, “a convenient term that comprises in itself most other components of performance practice” (Fabian, p. 207). Realising “small *figures* in the surface” is not simply a matter of separating them; each figure should be shaped independently, and the performer should make listeners aware of its relation (similarity, contrast, dialogue) with other figures appearing before, after or (in polyphonic textures) alongside it. Instead of a long *sostenuto* line, shaped almost exclusively by dynamics, rhetorical performances aim for internal shaping of figures, phrases and individual notes through the modification of dynamics, articulation, metre, and other factors.

The flexibility required by speech-like performance is antithetical to the notion of equalised beats, which dominated Baroque performance in the 1950s and 1960s. Conversely, speech-like performance is also incompatible with waves of *rubato*; large changes of pulse are not part of oratory, let alone “normal” speech. Rhetorical

performers also emphasise metric regularity – an alternation of weak and strong beats – which could be compromised by over-drawn *rubati*. However, regularity should not be confused with rigidity; the ideal of rhetorical performance incorporates the flexibility of *notes inegales*, and regular metric patterns can and should be altered to accommodate important musical factors (such as harmonic tension and resolution, or the prosody of the sung text in vocal music).

A similar requirement of small-range yet constant flexibility applies to dynamics as well: speech-like flexibility is incompatible with strict terraced dynamics. Conversely, it is difficult to accommodate large-scale dynamic inflections – be they sudden transitions from *forte* to *piano* or long-range *crescendi* and *diminuendi* – within a speech-like framework. Similarly, the consistent intensity of sound typical of many “modern” performances stands at odds with the speech-like flexibility implied by rhetorical aesthetics.

In sum, rhetoric-as-speech has direct relevance to performative expression. While discouraging the employment of some expressive devices, it encourages flexibility and attention to detail, facilitating the projection of tension and momentum. This connection between detailed articulation and the arousal of affections is also commented on in several German Baroque treatises (Butt, *Bach Interpretation*, pp. 19-24). The varied treatment of different figures was a means of holding the listener’s attention: Judy Tarling (p. 192) quotes Thomas Morley’s claim that musical-rhetorical figures were meant “to lead the audience ‘by the ears with chains of gold’”.

Figurenlehre theories are too strict to account for this variety. Their advocates treated musical figures as if they were words with fixed meaning (whereas, even in language, words do *not* have fixed, context-free meaning). Other scholars and performers adopt a more flexible approach:

In drawing direct comparisons between spoken rhetoric and musical rhetoric, a flexible and imaginative attitude needs to be adopted, so that seeking to match rhetorical terms with musical situations does not become a rigid and purposeless exercise. With rising awareness of the importance of the role of rhetoric in performing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, labelling for its own sake should be avoided unless the purpose and structure of the figure have also been understood. (Tarling, pp. 192/3)

John Butt (*B-minor Mass*, p. 85) points out that some figures act as expressive intensifiers – but *what* they intensify depends on the context. Paired notes can be used

to portray sighs or to evoke “light *galant* musical idioms”; the affect depends on the context (e.g., tonality, tempo, harmonic intensity), not just on the figures themselves.

In general, then, rhetorical figures do not have a precise, lexical significance. Word-paintings, of course, exist in musical practice and are duly noted in theory; but the overall function of rhetorical figures is wider, more flexible and less immediately definable. Yet their presence – as localised details to be realised in performance – is significant. If music resembles speech, then it should breathe as speech does – the idea of sustaining a phrase (even an instrumental phrase) for much longer than the duration of a human breath is quite probably a 19th century invention (the notion of endless melody was formulated by Richard Wagner).

Some critics of rhetorical performance (e.g., the conductor Helmuth Rilling) claim that it is incompatible with the realisation of long-term tensions; this claim has even been articulated by proponents of musical rhetoric (see the quote from Schulenberg above, for example), who claim that emphasis on such long-range tensions in Baroque music is gratuitous and anachronistic. In practice, however, there need not be such a contradiction. Baroque rhetorical treatises include references to the overall structure of movements (a subject which falls beyond the scope of this paper). More importantly, perhaps, local figures can be woven into a more continuous sequence without giving up their individuality; the shaping of local figures can even give impetus to the projection of long-term tensions (some examples are discussed in my online article “Rhetoric and gesture in performances of the *First Kyrie* from Bach’s Mass in B minor”).

Rhetoric-as-speech is usually marked by pragmatic flexibility. Some of the issues central to the thinking and practice of rhetorical performance might seem obvious: music should breathe naturally; local figures and motifs have expressive potential; performers should notice the relationship between words and music, and pay attention to musical structures (repetitions and alterations of motifs; canonic imitations between voices; changes from homophonic to polyphonic textures; etc.). Yet many of these seemingly obvious points were actively denied in the name of historical propriety in the mid-20th century, and it was useful to have Baroque treatises to support a return to the seemingly natural.

This much was acknowledged even by Rifkin (in Sherman, pp. 387-388), though in his view, many of these vital points could have been recovered without recourse to theoretical treatises. A thorough examination of the musical texts, familiarity with Baroque instruments and techniques, and a reliable musical intuition – all these could have brought many of the necessary insights, even without placing such a strong emphasis on theorists’ direct comparisons between music and speech.

Gustav Leonhardt, one of the earliest and most influential proponents and practitioners of rhetorical performance, indeed stated that his style is based more on his direct experience with old instruments than on theoretical study and reflection (in Sherman, p. 203). Dorottya Fabian argues that even familiarity with old instruments was not essential: rhetoric-as-speech has been revived by performers (including pianists like Tureck, Rosen and Gould) before it received serious scholarly examination. Their musical insights have led them to recognise – and realise in sound – key musical features that were missed earlier, and their performances might well have influenced scholarly research on the subject.

Rhetoric as Speech and Rhetoric as Semantics: A Comparison between Harnoncourt and Leonhardt

It would be erroneous to state that the discourse of rhetoric-as-speech regards musical figures as meaningless; writers and practitioners of speech-like performance consider them paramount for realising the expressive intensity of Baroque music. They reject, however, the notion that all these are figures are imbued with a specific semantic content.

This has significance for performance as well. The most notable proponent of rhetoric-as-semantics is Nikolaus Harnoncourt. He is usually loath to discuss the precise meaning he discovers in individual figures; but he makes clear his belief that these figures *have* meaning, which must be realised in performance. The contrast between this and the more pragmatic speech-like approach can be revealed by a comparison between him and his contemporary, Gustav Leonhardt.

Harnoncourt views articulation as the key element, to which all others should be subordinate, and proposes an “interwoven pattern of hierarchies”, consisting of **metre** (strong and weak beats), **harmony** (dissonances should be stressed, their resolutions unstressed), **rhythm** (emphasising elongated notes, even on weak beats) and

emphasis (on melodic peaks). These hierarchies combine to “breathe rhythm and life” into performances, replacing “machine-like regularity” with a more humane, speech-like approach (*Music as Speech*, p. 40).

Thus far, there would be little conflict between Harnoncourt and Leonhardt; and during the years of their collaborative efforts (from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s), the contrasts between them were subtle. By the mid-1980s, however, the stylistic differences between the two directors have increased. Both Harnoncourt and Leonhardt retained a preference for short, distinct phrases; but they diverged over the degree and manner in which different figures were to be distinguished from each other.

The cycle of Bach’s complete church cantatas recorded by the two directors (1971-1989) constitutes valuable documentation of their evolving styles. Leonhardt’s style did not change dramatically in the course of the cycle. Harnoncourt, however, became increasingly interventionist, exploratory and varied as the cycle progressed, and the differences between him and Leonhardt increase accordingly.

Leonhardt’s articulation mostly consists of gentle *non legato*. Downbeat accentuations can be quite forceful; but for the most part, his ubiquitous emphases are not strongly highlighted. At times, one could almost mistake his articulation for a continuous *legato*. Harnoncourt employs *legato* more frequently than Leonhardt, but usually in short, clearly-demarcated spans. His dynamic range also widened gradually as the cycle progressed, through a combination of stark, terraced contrasts and subtle, local modifications, tracing the melodic contours of individual voices (leading, sometimes, to simultaneous *crescendi* and *diminuendi*).

In polyphonic textures, this makes it easier to follow particular lines, but harder to comprehend the texture as a whole. Harnoncourt thus goes against an almost self-evident assumption that clarity should be paramount: his ideal is to reveal textural complexity without achieving full clarity. In a well-articulated performance,

Our ears penetrate [the texture] in depth and we clearly hear the different levels, which nonetheless merge to form a whole. On the foundation level we hear the “design,” the plan; on another level we find accented dissonances; in the next, a voice which is softly slurred in its diction, and another which is strongly articulated. All of this is at the same time, synchronized. The listener is not able to comprehend everything contained in the piece at once, but wanders through the various levels of the piece, always hearing something different. (*Music as Speech*, p. 44)

Rhetoric and polyphony

Here, Harnoncourt draws attention to a major implication of the rhetorical approach to performance – one which, outside Harnoncourt’s own writings, is rarely touched upon. The discourse of rhetoric compares a musical piece to a single speaker’s oration: an advocate’s plea, an actor’s soliloquy, a preacher’s sermon, a politician’s speech. But Baroque music is often polyphonic; even in operatic arias, the orchestral parts might be as richly endowed with rhetorical figures as the vocal part. Arguably, movements with polyphonic textures should be compared to plays, conversations, dialogues and discussions – rather than to speeches and monologues.

Indeed, several of the figures listed in Baroque treatises refer specifically to relationship between voices (*Fuga*, for instance, appears in several treatises as the name of a figure – “a compositional device in which a principal voice is imitated by subsequent voices”; see Bartel, pp. 277-290). Tarling regards a proper grasp of the relationship between voices as an integral part of the rhetorical approach to performance.

Rhetorical performance can therefore enliven the sense of dialogue within polyphonic textures. If each line is structured with sensitive and flexible attention to its own figurative content, and if the musicians are also aware of their relationship with the other parts, then richly-figurative textures can become richly dialogical (this is particularly evident when each part is entrusted to one player or singer, turning the texture into a palpable conversation between individuals). Beyond enhancing textural clarity and holding the listeners’ attention, such an approach can help make the performance more expressive and dramatic – and could lead to a revision of our understanding of the music.

This is particularly apparent in the perception of Bach’s polyphonic textures. Bach’s music has long been held as the supreme emblem of Order in music. It is common – almost cliché – to claim that it represents the ideal balance between harmony (which is easiest to achieve when the voices are mutually subordinate) and polyphony (which demands autonomy for each voice). A rhetorical approach to performance, however, has the potential to awaken clashes between the parts, undermining this balance: when the music combines – as Bach’s often does – intricately complex textures, chromaticism, myriad rhetorical figures and intense harmonies, and when individual parts are deliberately uncoordinated (with one voice

reaching a cadence when the other is in mid-phrase), the potential for internal conflict rises. There have been always theorists and analysts who emphasised this dramatic richness and inner tension in Bach's music. Rhetorical performance, however, can help make these tensions palpably audible to the listener.²

Not surprisingly, this potential is intensely realised in many of Harnoncourt's Bach performances. This does not always require the employment of aggressive gestures. Doubt and unease can lurk beneath deceptively comforting surfaces. Full, sensuous sonorities and *legato* phrasing can be used to generate internal restlessness. Harnoncourt's "*legato*" often consists of "*sostenuto* fragments": short spans of smooth articulation, their caesuras rubbing against the beat and clashing with similar caesuras in other voices. Dynamic and agogic nuances are constantly manipulated. Discomfort arises from the accumulated effect of such small gestures.

Harnoncourt goes further than most in this pursuit of discomfort (though he is not alone: one can cite, in this context, several performances by Gardiner, Jacobs, Junghanel, Hengelbrock and others). A sense of constant alertness and occasional inner conflict, however, characterises many rhetorically-inflected performances, even when arising from the more pragmatic, rhetoric-as-speech perspective.

Summary: Rhetoric and humanisation

Rhetorical performance has had a humanising effect on contemporary performances of Baroque music. It increased listeners' attention to the contribution of individual voices, allowing individual musicians greater freedom and more breathing space. Music was shaped in a manner highly reminiscent of bodily gestures, matching the span of a human breath. And music which has often been treated as objective, monumental and unapproachable – or presented as an image of stark, super-human perfection – was given a more human face.

The process does not stop at the transition to the 19th century. In recent years, a curious development occurred. As long as his repertoire reached primarily as far as 1800, musicians like Harnoncourt argued that musical rhetoric began to depart in the 19th century; that certain forces (Harnoncourt draws particular attention to the

² None of these features is unique to Bach; but in Bach's case, the gap between the harmonious image and the dramatic potential is particularly potent. Ironically, complexity of Bach's textures can be used to support both the image of Bach as the Emblem of Order and the image of Bach the intense, rhetorical dramatist.

teaching of the Paris Conservatoire; others cited the influence of Wagner) began to erode rhetoric, replacing it with other expressive ends and means. Romanticism was (and is) referred to as the rejection of musical rhetoric.

But as HIP moved into the 19th century, the message changed. Many historical performers now claim that Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms maintained the rhetorical traditions; the detailed shaping of localised figures that developed under the auspices of rhetorical performance is now applied to Romantic music as well.

This might be seen as an example of twisting history to fit your own ends. On the other hand, it could be argued that, while the 19th century did introduce new elements (such as Wagner's endless melody), these continued to co-exist (peacefully or otherwise) with the legacy of rhetoric; arguments along similar lines appear, for example, in Harnoncourt's recently-published collection, *Töne sind höhere Worte*. These are questions for another article; but, as a personal point-of-view, I have to state that the results for musical performance have been mostly beneficial, with the rhetorical approach revealing much of the inner dialogue and multifaceted richness of all the music it touched upon.

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The list below only contains items directly quoted in my paper; space precluded, for example, a detailed listing of writings by *Figurenlehre* theorists. More detailed bibliographies can be found, *inter alia*, in Butt (*Bach Interpretation*), Fabian, Haynes, Sherman and in my writings (cited below).

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