

Dissertation Defense Talk:

The Analysis of Early 18th-Century Music and its Future Prospects

In this dissertation I offer a new way of observing and interpreting the temporality of Baroque music in general, and the phrase rhythm of George Frideric Handel in particular. What I have come up with is not a technique, nor a prescriptive method, but a blend of analytical, narrative, and stylistic observations that respond to questions raised by the rhythms of the late Baroque and not previously answered. My approach is both interdisciplinary and intertextual (or posttextual, to use Kevin Korsyn's preferred appellation). It draws on Schenkerian theory and David Neumeyer's extension of its background paradigms, on the durational studies of Carl Schachter and William Rothstein, on the ritornello insights of Laurence Dreyfus and Michael Marissen, on Harold Bloom's and Kevin Korsyn's insights into authorial borrowings, on the sentence formulation introduced by Arnold Schoenberg and codified by William Caplin, on the three-way stylistic classification introduced by the Greek and Roman orators, on the semiotic work of Robert Hatten and Roland Barthes, and on the detection of large-scale narrative archetypes by Anthony Newcomb, John Daverio, and many others.

I say that my approach is intertextual because one of my principal concerns is the definition of the stylistic context within which Handel operated. Although I interpret each composition as an artwork worthy of sustained technical investigation in its own right, I perform the analysis within the larger context of the tonal,

durational, and narrative idioms established by the composers of the high style—among which Handel occupies an honored place—and by the composers of the middle style, from which he borrowed exhaustively. For that reason, I turn with some frequency to the music of François Couperin: The entirety of Couperin's instrumental music, so it seems, wielded great influence on much of what Handel did in his instrumental works. Many of the rhythmic and structural archetypes one finds in Couperin's keyboard works and in his chamber music recur on a magnified scale in Handel's concerted works. Despite differences in pacing—Couperin's paces embody the improvisatory freedom of the middle style—Couperin's music offers the proper backdrop against which one might study Handel's.

All the Couperin borrowings I cite (with the exception of an earlier finding by Peter Williams)¹ are made known here for the first time. In preparing my dissertation I have analyzed not only a substantial part of Handel's and Couperin's instrumental works, but also dozens of suite and concerto movements by Bach, Telemann, Rameau, and Vivaldi. Although these are not often cited, the dissertation absorbs and reflects the cumulative results of my entire research.

How important large-scale idioms that cut across stylistic barriers are to the proper interpretation of the Baroque repertoire is made dramatically clear by an article about prolongations that appeared in a recent issue of *Music Analysis*.² Rather than offer her own definitive interpretation of Bach's figured Chorale No. 47,

¹ Williams 1986.

² Kielian-Gilbert 2003.

“Beschränkt, ihr Weisen,” Marianne Kielian-Gilbert suggests that we oscillate between her reading and that of H. Lee Riggins and Gregory Proctor on the one hand, and that of William Rothstein on the other; see Example 1.³ Such oscillation would be no simple task, because each of the readings is fairly involved, and because each is burdened by a thicket of slurs and other symbols (most of them added on to the companion analyses by the author herself). A more idiomatic and more intertextual way of looking at the passage would be to comb its voice leading for long-range idioms of the type that appear across countless Baroque pieces, and to see if any of them holds the voice leading together here. And indeed, Examples 2 and 3 reveal that a familiar bass idiom does underlie the first strain of the excerpt: It is the suspension—explicit in Example 2 and implicit in Example 3—of the tonic from the opening measure to the appearance of the major supertonic, in third inversion in bar 5 of the Gavotte in Example 2, and in first inversion in bar 6 of the Chorale in Example 3.⁴ At that point in the Chorale, an implicit applied dominant in 4/2 position (similar to the Gavotte’s explicit V4/2) introduces a rising prefix that leads to the tonicization of the central dominant at the double bar.⁵ The prefix is explicit in the Gavotte, on the third page, and implicit in the Chorale, on the fourth page. The opening tone of the

³ Riggins 1989 and Rothstein 1990a. I thank Blackwell Publishing Ltd. for permission to reproduce most of Kielian-Gilbert’s Figure 2 as my Example 1.

⁴ The sketch in Example 2 is adapted from Aldwell and Schachter 2003, p. 462, Example 27-16.

⁵ More detailed discussion of such prefixes appears in Rothstein 2004, in Willner 2000, and throughout the present Dissertation. See also C. P. E. Bach’s *Versuch* (Bach 1949), p.256.

Chorale's prefix, the dominant's upper third G#, remains implicit as well; it is represented by the dominant's root, E, a sixth above. The two other tones of the prefix, A and B, appear in person, an octave above their proper register as well, at the turn of bar 7. Interpreting Bach's figured Chorale in this way – a very common interpretation that recurs frequently, at various levels, in the analysis of early eighteenth-century music – clarifies and simplifies the graph considerably, removing many of Killian-Gilbert's overdrawn slurs. And yet it does not preclude accepting the viability of her reading and that of the other readings she quotes: One can, if one so wants, hear all three peering through as shadow readings, or rather shadow structures, along the lines of Frank Samarotto's shadow meter.⁶

(This is not to discount the value of Killian-Gilbert's work or the value of her article. The methodology it proposes works very well when one tries to reduce rhythmically the irregular metrics of the middle style's ritornello themes (to cite one genre that is hospitable to irregular metrics). In such themes, overlaps, prefixes and especially suffixes are added on at different levels; their reduction, conversely, generates several readings, each quite idiomatic in its own right and each residing on different level. These readings – unlike readings of irregular metrics in the high style -- are often mutually exclusive, so one must oscillate between them in just the manner Killian-Gilbert describes. I plan to elaborate on this issue in a future study.)⁷

⁶ Samarotto 1999a.

⁷ Another Baroque phenomenon that would require oscillation is the appearance of idiomatic progressions, especially in short pieces such as menuets and trios, that

What I have left out of the dissertation, and what remains to be done—enough material for several dissertations and a number of books, not to mention countless articles—is a theory of isorhythmic repetitions at several levels, repetitions that underlie much of the Baroque and Classical repertoires; an account of overlaps between chordal domains both at the level of the measure and at the level of the complete composition (these overlaps run through the repertoire more deeply and more rhythmically than has heretofore been acknowledged); an account of the incomplete progressions that realize such overlaps; an investigation into the influence of the eight church modes on deep middleground structures in the music of the High Baroque; an investigation into the appearance of augmented seconds in the deep middleground of the same repertoire during the High Baroque; a study of metrical irregularity and voice-leading paradigms in the middle style, especially in the music of Couperin, Telemann, Vivaldi, and Zelenka; an analytical approach to the study of Baroque vocal music; an account of the emergence of Baroque melody from the common stock of European folk songs and from the ornate fioritures of early Italian opera; and a theory as well as a history of the developing variation across the eighteenth-century repertoire. The developing variation has its beginnings in the music of the late seventeenth century—not in the Classical era, as several scholars have erroneously maintained—and it serves to articulate and to mediate between the various levels of the aforementioned isorhythmic repetitions. In fact, one might say

overlap each other (such progressions can be found in the menuets and trios of J. S. Bach's French Suites). *That* would certainly require a separate study, but the topic is so difficult it might have to be taken up by a committee of like-minded theorists.

Willner, Defense (revised) -

that it is in the history of developing variations and in the history of isorhythmic repetitions that the remaining secrets of eighteenth-century phrase rhythm reside. I can only hope that future dissertations will tackle these fascinating topics.