DURATIONAL PACING IN HANDEL’S
INSTRUMENTAL WORKS:
THE NATURE OF TEMPORALITY IN THE MUSIC OF THE
HIGH BAROQUE

by

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Introduction and Chapters 1-3

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Abstract

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Adviser: Carl Schachter

For all the advances in musicology and music theory during the past century, we still know very little about Baroque phrase rhythm and temporality—what determines the length of phrases and periods, how phrases and periods relate, or how the music flows at a steady beat without becoming monotonous. These and many related questions cut across the border between theory and history, and they invite interdisciplinary exploration, one that includes narrative theory. To find some answers we must first relate the tonal and the durational components of the music to each other and to the narrative discourse of the composition. With this task in mind, I tackle the joint phenomena of pacing and pace expansion, treating them as the critical common denominators that run
through all the elements of the music. It is they who forge a network of tonal, durational, and narrative links between the elements.

From the hierarchy of paces I single out the basic pace—the underlying, even movement of the outer voices—as the durational component that articulates both the contrapuntal and the narrative structures of the piece. The basic pace is the durational earmark of Bach’s, Handel’s, and Scarlatti’s high instrumental style. While I limit my investigation to Handel’s keyboard and orchestral works, I demonstrate how my approach may be modified to tackle the more informal rhythms that animate the middle style of Vivaldi, Telemann, and Couperin.

To penetrate the narrative discourse of each piece, I link the developmental and progressive expansion of the basic pace (which ranges from plain sequential expansions to double, triple, quadruple, or even larger sequential expansions) to the realization of plot archetypes that are common in the compositions of the high style. I then trace the prevalence of both expansion and archetype to tensions between assorted borrowings: Handel, like other composers, often selects borrowings that are purposely incompatible with each other.

In order to carry out this analytical inquiry, which occupies chapters 1, 4, and 5, I include a theoretical survey of Handel’s duple and triple meters in chapters 2 and 3. I use the survey to show how norms of pacing, grouping, and displacement form the stage on which the plot archetypes, the narrative discourse, and the expansion of the basic pace are played out in concert with each other.

Going beyond the enlargement of pace, I conclude that it is the phenomenon of expansion in its many garbs—motivic enlargement, grouping modulation, incremental
periodicity, to name but a few—that helps tie all these seemingly disparate elements of
the music’s temporality together. By transforming an explicit or implicit model into a
spacious developmental entity, each expansion enables the composition to argue, propel,
and resolve its narrative argument despite the unrelenting momentum of the surface.
I thank the American Handel Society for awarding me the J. Merrill Knapp Research Fellowship in 1993 in support of my analytical work and its computerized setting in the Notewriter program; the Society for Music Theory, for awarding me the Emerging Scholar Award for 2001 in recognition of my article, “Sequential Expansion and Handelian Phrase Rhythm” (1999), which set the stage for the present dissertation; and the New York Public Library, for granting me several leaves of absence to complete my research for the dissertation. I also wish to thank the British Library, the estate of Ernst Oster, and Yale University Press for granting me the copyright permissions that are cited in the text and in the examples.

I am grateful to my adviser, Carl Schachter, both for his insightful suggestions and his inspired teaching over the course of several decades; to my first reader, Charles Burkhart, for posing challenging questions that have fostered many improvements; and to my second reader, Floyd K. Grave, for sharing his wide ranging expertise and offering support that has helped in more ways than I can describe.

I extend thanks to the remaining members of my Dissertation Committee—Ellie M. Hisama, Chair, and Wayne C. Petty—whose careful perusal of the manuscript enhanced the final product quite considerably.

As I explain in the Introduction, my dissertation takes as its point of departure the seminal works on meter, rhythm, and phrase rhythm that Carl Schachter and William Rothstein have published over the years, and it comes into close contact with the
theoretical work of Ido Abravaya, Eytan Agmon, Edward Aldwell, L. Poundie Burstein, William E. Caplin, Laurence Dreyfus, Walter Frisch, Robert Gjerdingen, Floyd K. Grave, Robert S. Hatten, Timothy L. Jackson, Roger Kamien, Kevin Korsyn, Jonathan D. Kramer, Harald Krebs, Steve Larson, David Lasocki, Edward Laufer, Justin London, Jairo Moreno, Anthony Newcomb, Wayne C. Petty, William Renwick, Frank Samarotto, and Zdenek Skoumal. It also connects with the historical work of Terence Best, John H. Roberts, David Schulenberg, Reinhard Strohm, Douglas Townsend, and the late Eugene K. Wolf. I wish to thank all these scholars, as well as Bruce Gustafson, John Rothgeb, Paul Scheepers, and Brent Yorgason for their kindness and patience in responding to various queries in person, by mail, or through e-mail.

I am deeply indebted to my colleagues at the Music Division of the New York Public Library, from Acting Chief Charles Eubanks to pages Junelle Carter and Kizeeta Williams, for putting up with a dissertating colleague and for bending over backwards in matters ranging from schedule adjustments to photocopy requests. And I am particularly indebted to the sustained encouragement of Fran Barulich, Linda Fairtile (now at the University of Richmond), Bob Kosovsky, and John Shepard.

Linnéa Johnson has done an extraordinary job of processing and reprocessing the entire text, and Arthur Maisel has excelled in setting the most extended musical examples—the entirety of chapters 4 and 5 as well as the revised Introduction—in the Notewriter program. Paul S. Carter, with help from Damon Sink, set chapters 1-3 and the original Introduction magnificently, building on the efforts of Tim McCord and Frank Samarotto, who prepared the examples for much of my earlier work. Arthur Maisel
deserves credit for the elegant shape that the examples, all of them substantially revised and resized, finally took.

The dissertation could not have been completed without the help of family and friends, who stood by me through thick and thin. My mother, Ruth Willner, as well as Penny Edgar, Martha Eddy, Margaret Grave, Blythe Kropf, Mitch Rabinowitz, Gail Rehman, Hedi Siegel, Eric Wen, and Leslie Smolen Wuebben have my gratitude for bearing with me and helping out in ways more numerous than I could relate during the (very) long period of authorship.

Finally, a word about Ernst Oster, to whose memory the dissertation is dedicated. I studied with Oster in class at the Mannes College of Music between the years of 1972 and 1977, and I remember vividly how suspicious he was of both rhythmic studies and departures from Schenkerian theory. In his magically quaint way he once said, “Ever since I arrived in this country, everyone has been trying to study rhythm. Frankly, I find it the hardest thing.” He also felt that it is incumbent upon those who interfere with Schenker’s formulations to come up with a commensurable alternative—an all but impossible feat. Notwithstanding my focus on rhythmic issues and my adoption of David Neumeyer’s three-part Ursatz, I have tried to preserve the spirit and the essence of Oster’s approach—that never-ending quest for the telling detail that might shed artistic light on the whole—throughout the dissertation. I can only hope that I have succeeded in some measure, and that Ernst would have liked the results.
to the memory of Ernst Oster
TABLE OF CONTENTS

VOLUME I

List of Illustrations xii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1: Tonal and Durational Pacing 61
Chapter 2: Pace, Grouping, and Displacement in Duple Meter 130
Chapter 3: Pace Grouping, and Displacement in Triple Meter 201

VOLUME II

Chapter 4: Pace and Enlargement in Handel’s Solo Keyboard Works 253
Chapter 5: Pace and Enlargement in Handel’s Orchestral Works 340
Appendix: “Nascent Periodicity and Bach’s ‘Progressive’ Galanterien” 425
Glossary 442
Bibliography 482

VOLUME III

Musical Examples 528
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Handel, Suite in F minor (1720), Allemande</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 1–9, pace reductions</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 14–19, tonal reduction</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 1–13, tonal reduction</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. François Couperin, <em>Pièces de clavcin</em>, Ordre 8, Gavotte, bars 1–8, score and pace reductions</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sources for Handel, E major Suite, Allemande, in Couperin, <em>Pièces de clavcin</em>, Ordres 2 and 5</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Handel, Organ Concerto in Bb, Op. 4, No. 6, I: Andante allegro, bars 1–6, score and contrapuntal reduction</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Restoration of underlying time spans</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Handel, Concerto Grosso in D major/minor, Op. 3, No. 6, II: Allegro, bars 11–14, score and pace reductions</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Time-span reduction of Example 11, normalized in the style of Lerdahl and Jackendoff</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Handel, F minor Allemande</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 1–13, contrapuntal reductions</td>
<td>546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. François Couperin, <em>Pièces de clavcin</em>, Ordre 8, Gavotte, score and pace reductions</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5. and 1.6. Handel, F minor Allemande, principal chords 552
1.7. Handel, F minor Allemande, durational profiles, bars 1–13 553
1.8. Handel, F minor Allemande, points of foreshortening 554
1.9. Handel, F minor Allemande, recomposition of bars $2^b$–$3^a$
    and $6^b$–$7^b$ bars $11^b$–$12^a$ 554
1.10. Handel, F minor Allemande, growing tessitura 554
1.11. Handel, F minor Allemande, grouping pace profile 555
1.13. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 1–2, normalized time-span
    reductions in the style of Lerdahl and Jackendoff 556
    bars 1–22 557
1.15. Handel, E minor Concerto, bars 1–22, tonal reduction 560
1.16. Handel, E minor Concerto, bars 1–22, pace reductions 562
1.17. Handel, E minor Concerto, bars 1–2, tonal reductions 565
1.18. D. Scarlatti, Essercizi per gravicembalo (1738),
    Sonata in G minor, K.8, first reprise 566
1.19. D. Scarlatti, Essercizi, Sonata in G minor, K.12, first reprise 567
1.20. Handel and Scarlatti parallelisms 569
1.21. Handel, E minor Concerto, Allegro, bars 13–16, quadruple
    sequential expansion 569
1.22. Handel, E minor Concerto, bars 1–4, 5–12, tonal reduction 570
1.23. Handel, E minor Concerto, enlargement of opening theme 571
1.24. Handel, E minor Concerto, rising fourth and multiple
    voice exchanges 573
1.25. Handel, Suite in G (1703c./1733), Courante, bars 1–12, score and
    tonal reduction 574
1.26. Handel, G major Courante, bars 1–12, pace reductions 575
1.27. Handel, Suite in E (1720), Courante, bars 1–8, pace reductions 576
Chapter 2

Example 2.1. Basic segments

2.2. Enlarged basic segments

2.3. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 1–13, formal structure

2.4. Handel, Suite in D minor (1703c./1733), Allemande, bars 1–8, score and pace reductions

2.5. Handel, Suite in E minor (1720), Fugue, bars 1–11a, score and pace reductions

2.6. Handel, E minor Fugue, displaced subject, bars 17b–20

2.7. Handel, E minor Fugue, bars 29–37a, notated and shadow meter

2.8. Handel, E minor Fugue, bars 62–66, unnotated 3/2 time

2.9. Handel, Suite in D minor (1720), Allemande, bars 1–2, score and pace reductions

2.10. Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 3–5, score and pace reduction

2.11. Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 6–8, score and pace reductions

2.12. Handel, Suite in G minor (1720), Andante, bars 1–4, score and pace reductions

2.13. Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 15–18, score and pace reduction

2.14. Handel, E minor Concerto, Op. 6, Allegro, bars 31–37, score and basic pace

2.15. Handel, Organ Concerto in F, Op. 4, No. 4, I: Allegro, bars 1–8

2.16. Kirnberger, *Kunst des reinen Stazes*, Example 4.13 (c)

2.17. Handel, Organ Concerto in F, II: Andante, bars 1–5a

2.18. Handel, D minor Allemande (1720)

2.19. Handel, Organ Concerto in F, Allegro

2.20. Handel, Organ Concerto in G minor, Op. 4, No. 3, IV: Gavotte, bars 1–8a


2.22. Handel, Suite in E (1720), Allemande, bars 1–5, score and pace reduction
2.23. Handel, E major Allemande, bars 5b–13
2.24. Handel, Suite in G (1703c./1733), Allemande
2.25. Handel, Suite in E, Air (“The Harmonious Blacksmith”),
   bars 1–3a; Giuliani, “Tema di Handel,” Op. 107, bars 1–8;
   Mozart, Piano Sonata in C, K. 545, Rondo, bars 1–4
2.26. Handel, Suite in A (1720), Allemande
2.27. Handel, Suite in G minor (1720), Passacaille, bars 1–4; Organ
   Concerto in Bb, Op. 7, No. 1, I: Andante, bars 43–45a
2.28. J. S. Bach, Partita in A minor for clavier, Allemande, bars 1–2;
   Handel, Suite in G minor (1720), Gigue, bars 1, 6–8
2.29. Handel, Six Fugues or Voluntarys, Fuge in C minor
2.30. Handel, Concerto Grosso in D major/minor, Op. 3, No. 6,
   I: [Allegro], bars 1–10
2.31. Handel, C minor Fugue, bars 34–54, facsimile of autograph
   manuscript and transcription
2.32. Handel, Flute Sonata in E minor, Op. 1, No. 1b, II: Allegro,
   bars 1–7, score and contrapuntal reduction
2.33. Handel, Concerto in Alexander’s Feast, III: Allegro,
   bars 1–7a, 16–22, score and pace reductions
2.34. Handel, Music for the Royal Fireworks, Bourée, bars 1–4,
   score and pace reductions
2.35. Handel, Suite in F minor, Fugue, subject, bars 1–5a;
   sketch of subject transcribed from autograph manuscript;
   bars 19–23a, 45–49
2.36. Handel, Suite in E, Allemande, bars 14–17a;
   Couperin, Pièces de clavécin, Ordre 5, Allemande,
   “La Longivièrè,” bars 10–16a
2.37. Handel, Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op. 6, No. 10,
   IV: Allegro
Example

Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op. 6, No. 10, IV: Allegro
3.2. Handel, Suite in F minor, Courante, bars 1–5a, score and reduction
3.3. Handel, D minor Concerto; Concerto in Bb for Harp or Organ,  
Op. 4, No. 6, II: Larghetto, bars 1–6, and III: Allegro moderato,  
bars 37–44
3.4. Handel, Concerto Grosso in Bb, Op. 3, No. 1, II: Largo, bars 1–10a
3.5. François Couperin, Pièces de clavecin, Ordre 8, Passacaille,  
the Rondeau theme and the beginning of the fifth couplet
3.6. Handel, Suite in F# minor (1720), Largo, bars 1–6
3.7. Handel, Concerto in Bb for Harp or Organ, III: Allegro moderato,  
bars 1–4, 25–28, score and pace reductions  
E minor Concerto, Op. 6, No. 3, I: Larghetto, bars 1–7a
J. S. Bach, Partita in E minor for clavier, Allemande, bars 1–4a
3.9. Handel, Concerto Grosso in B minor, Op. 6, No. 12, III: Larghetto,  
e piano (in E major), bars 13–20, score and pace reduction
3.10. Handel, Concerto Grosso in D, Op. 6, No. 5, IV: Largo  
(in B minor), bars 32–37
3.11. Handel, Concerto Grosso in C minor, Op. 6, No. 8, VI: Allegro,  
bars 1–8, score and pace reduction
3.13. Handel, Suite in F minor, Courante, bars 7–11, score and  
pace reduction
3.14. Handel, F minor Courante, bars 27–28, score and pace reduction
3.15. Handel, Suite in G (1703c./1733), Courante, bars 1–12, score  
and pace reduction
3.16. Rameau, Nouvelle Suites de Pièces de Clavecin (1728), Suite in G,  
“L’égyptienne”
| 3.17. Handel, Suite in G minor (1720), Allegro, bars 1–8          | 639 |
| (in G major), bars 1–5<sup>a</sup>, 21<sup>b</sup>–25<sup>a</sup> | 640 |
| 3.20. Handel, Polonaise, incipit contour and extension          | 642 |
| 3.21. Handel, Polonaise, bars 25–35<sup>a</sup>                 | 643 |
| 3.22. Handel, Polonaise, bars 63<sup>b</sup>–69<sup>a</sup>     | 645 |
| 3.23. Handel, Polonaise, bars 9<sup>b</sup>–15<sup>a</sup>      | 645 |
| 3.27. Handel, Organ Concerto No. 13, in F, III: Larghetto, bars 1–6, score, time–span and tonal reductions | 650 |
| 3.28. Handel, Suite in G minor (1703c./1733), Gigue, bars 1–6, score and pace reduction | 652 |
| 3.29. Handel, Suite in G minor (1703c./1733), Gigue (early version), bars 1–5<sup>a</sup> | 653 |
| 3.30. Handel, Suite in G minor (1720), Gigue, bars 1–2<sup>a</sup>, 6–8 | 653 |
| 3.31. Handel, Concerto Grosso in A minor, Op. 6, No. 4, IV: Allegro, bars 1–15<sup>a</sup> | 654 |
| 3.33. J. S. Bach, Partita in E minor for clavier, Sarabande, bars 1–2 | 656 |
| 3.34. Handel, A minor Concerto, Allegro, bars 1–15<sup>a</sup>, durational reduction | 657 |
| 3.36. Handel, Hornpipe, rhythmic parallelisms | 659 |
3.37. Handel, Hornpipe, bars 1–11, durational reduction

3.38. Handel, Hornpipe, bars 5\textsuperscript{a}–8\textsuperscript{a}, combined meters

3.39. Handel, E minor Concerto, Op. 6, No. 3, I: Larghetto,
   bars 1–13\textsuperscript{a}, score and durational reduction

3.40. Handel, Concerto Grosso in D major/minor, Largo (in B minor)

3.41. Handel, D major Concerto, Largo, durational reduction

---

Chapter 4

**Example**

4.1. Handel, Suite in F$\#$ minor, Gigue, bars 1–18

4.2. Handel, F$\#$ minor Gigue, pace reductions

4.3. Handel, E minor Fugue

4.4. Handel, E minor Fugue, bars 1–9\textsuperscript{a}, enlargements of B–A–G

4.5. Handel, E minor Fugue, bars 16–23\textsuperscript{a}, 62–66, further enlargements

4.6. Handel, E minor Fugue, tonal reduction

4.7. Handel, F minor Allemande

4.8. Handel, F minor Allemande, second reprise (bars 14–29),
   tonal reduction

4.9. Handel, F minor Allemande, pace reductions

4.10. Handel, F minor Allemande, bars 14–19, normalized cadential
      progressions and obbligato pace

4.11. Handel, F minor Allemande, descents from ab\textsuperscript{2}

4.12. Handel, E minor Fugue, bars 40–53

4.13. Handel, Suite in D minor (1720), Allemande


4.15. Handel, D minor Allemande, tonal reduction

4.16. Handel, D minor Allemande, pace reductions

4.17. Handel, D minor Allemande, motivic and registral introduction
      of primary melodic tones and bass arpeggiations

4.18. Handel, D minor Allemande, hidden repetitions
      (bars 3\textsuperscript{b}–5 and 14\textsuperscript{b}–16)

4.19. Handel, D minor Allemande, hidden rhythmic repetitions
4.20. Handel, D minor Allemande, hidden repetitions  
(bars 1–2 and 16–17)  
4.21. Handel, D minor Allemande, first set of intensified  
turn enlargements  
4.22. Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 17\(^b\)–24, step–by–step  
outline of bass progression  
4.23. Handel, D minor Allemande, enlargements of turn figure  
4.24. François Couperin, *Pièces de clavecin*, Ordre 2, Allemande,  
“La Laborieuse,” bars 1–8  
4.25. Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 1–8  
Couperin, “La Laborieuse,” bars 26–27\(^a\)  
Handel, D minor Allemande, bars 1–2  
4.27. Couperin, *Pièces de clavecin*, Ordre 2, Courante 2, bars 1–8,  
and Handel, D minor Allemande  

Chapter 5  

*Example*  
5.1. Handel, E minor Concerto, III: Allegro  
5.2. Handel, E minor Concerto, tonal reduction  
5.3. Handel, E minor Concerto, pace reductions  
5.4. Handel, E minor Concerto, hidden repetitions  
5.5. Handel, E minor Concerto, climactic passages  
5.6. Handel, E minor Concerto, the emerging periodic grid  
5.7. Handel, E minor Concerto, transformations of first  
quadruple expansion  
5.8. Handel, E minor Concerto, hidden, related enlargements  
of rising fourth  
5.9. Handel, E minor Concerto, hidden repetitions and diminutions  
5.10. Handel, Concerto Grosso in G minor, Op. 6, No. 6, IV: Allegro  
5.11. Handel, G minor Concerto, tonal reduction  
5.12. Handel, G minor Concerto, pace reduction
5.13. François Couperin, *Pièces de clavecin*, Ordre 8, II: Allemande,
“La Ausoniène” 763

Handel, *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, IV: La Rejouissance,”
bars 1–8 765

5.15. Couperin, “La Ausoniène,” bars 1–4, and Handel, G minor Concerto,
bars 1–2; Couperin, “L’Évaporée,” bars 1–4, and Handel, G minor
Concerto, bars 7–8 766

5.16. Handel, G minor Concerto, bars 1–6, with hypothetical *Epilog* 767

5.17. Handel, G minor Concerto, bars 21–25, and Couperin,
“La Ausoniène,” bars 19–24 768

5.18. Handel, G minor Concerto, bar 57, and Couperin, “La Ausoniène,”
bars 12–18 769

5.19. Handel, G minor Concerto, bars 71–73, and
Couperin, “La Ausoniène,” bars 8–12, 32–37;
D. Scarlatti, Sonata in D minor, K.18, bars 20–23 770

5.20. Handel, G minor Concerto, basic length reductions 771

Appendix: Nascent Periodicity and Bach’s “Progressive” *Galanterien* 775

Example 1. Bach, English Suite in A major, BWV 806, Bourrée I,
(a) phrase structure and (b) tonal reduction 776

2. Bach, A major English Suite, Bourrée I, durational reduction 778

3. Bach, English Suite in G minor, BWV 808, Gavotte I,
(a) phrase structure and (b) tonal reduction 779

4. Bach, G minor English Suite, Gavotte I, durational reduction 781

5. Bach, Suite in C major for Violoncello Solo, BWV 1009, Bourrée,
(a) phrase structure and (b) tonal reduction 782

6. Bach, C major Cello Suite, Bourrée, durational reduction 784

7. Bach, English Suite in D minor, BWV 811, I: Prélude, bars 52–66,
(a) phrase structure and (b) durational reduction 785
8. Bach, French Suite in D minor, BWV 812, Allemande, bars 1–12,
    (a) phrase structure and (b) tonal reduction  787
10. Phrase and subphrase diagrams  790