

## Mozart and the English Suites: Borrowings, Isorhythm, and Plasticity

Channan Willner

Though it is not well known, the Prélude from J. S. Bach's A minor keyboard Suite, BWV 818a, sounds familiar: Two of its sequences (bars 1-8 and 22-26) resemble closely the two sequences from the dominant area of the first-movement exposition from Mozart's C major Piano Concerto, K.467 (bars 147-58 and 171-78). Between Mozart's sequences an improvisatory reminiscence of the second theme appears (bars 136-43): Like the theme itself, it recalls the developmental arpeggiations in the second reprise of the Sarabande from Bach's G minor English Suite (bars 17-20). Mozart's earlier G minor excursions (bars 109ff.) also resemble the Sarabande (bars 9ff.), and Mozart's development concludes with a quotation from the closing measures of the Gavotte from Bach's G minor Suite.

Borrowings from the English Suites (Lichnowsky's copy of which Mozart kept during the 1780's: Dürr 1981; Schmid, 1950), and from the Suites, BWV 818a and 819, interlace in similar fashion throughout Mozart's late music. I suggest that there are rhythmic reasons for these appropriations. Tonal music relies on isorhythmic repetitions of figures, motives and themes at various levels for its developmental spinning. Isorhythm at both figural and structural levels – much of it veiled – pervades the piano concertos, and especially K. 467 (Block, 1991). The need to project improvisatory spontaneity (what Samarotto, 1999 and 2001, calls *temporal plasticity*) and to assert the authority of the high style – while relying on the mundane mechanics of isorhythm – renders the dialectical alternation between drastically different borrowings an attractive, indeed indispensable ploy of *ars combinatoria*. It allows Mozart to maintain continuity and momentum while exercising control over the timing and the degree of the changes that the whims of the surface demand.