Figure and Affection in *Orgelbüchlein* by J. S. Bach

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Abstract: *The musical-rhetorical figure possesses a rich area of representation, going from the "decoratio" function to the semantic inversion, in accordance with the Doctrine of Affections (Affektenlehre). Since the Baroque period, there have been many attempts to group musical figures by their nature and rhetorical functions. The Doctrine of Affections facilitated the transfer of the expressiveness of the figure from the vocal to the instrumental. A close connection between the rhetorical figure and the affections appears in Bach's "Orgelbüchlein". The set of 46 Chorale preludes for organ, BWV 599-644, constitute a veritable dictionary of expressive constants that can be found in the religious or even secular works composed by Bach.*

Keywords: *J. S. Bach, rhetoric, affekt, figure*

1. Introduction

The views on the role of the musical-rhetorical figure cover a wide range, starting from the simple function of the dissonance it encompasses, to the higher level of language of affections. Ever since the Baroque period, there have been many attempts to group musical figures by their nature and rhetorical functions.

Numerous Baroque figures come from vocal music. Bach is considered "the first moment of the full coherence of a musical rhetoric", and "the unequivocal relationship between biblical text and Bach's music reveals the mechanism of meaning in music" (Banciu 2006, 69-70). "The songs and oratories [of Bach, note mine] represent [...] as many models, where the musical expression is circulated through the rhetorical figures and with the help of the symbols, the metaphor and the allegory contained in the literary text" (Toduţă 1973, 86). André Pirro, in *Bach's Aesthetics* (1907), deals with the expressive language of the cantata: "Deeply attached to the evangelical religion, he [Bach, note mine] believes that the religious text [...] is essential for the edification of believers. The spirit of the public is cut in the way of listening to music as a language" (Pirro 1907, 11-12).

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In accordance with the Doctrine of Affections, the musical-rhetorical figure has surpassed the exclusive framework of vocal music, penetrating instrumental music, as well. But in the opinion expressed by G. Banciu, "in the absence of the word, the figure retains only partially the original meanings, the semantic freedom being conditioned on the one hand by the generally accepted meanings according to the analogical thinking, and on the other by the musical context in which they appear (melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, dynamic, timbral)" (Banciu 2006, 70).

2. Melodic-rhythmic constants according to the dominating affections of the text

The multitude of musical figures, over 100 in number, "is a mixture of syntactic and semantic aspects" (V. Sandu-Dediu 2013, 68). From his predecessor, J. Burmeister, who had run a classification of over 100 figures, "Bach took on a rich taxinomy" (Banciu 2006, 65). Above all this information of documentary interest, it is interesting to reveal those springs that prove the involvement of rhetorical symbols in the Bachian compositional thought. This trend becomes a desideratum for the contemporary researcher who tends to re-evaluate the Bachian (and contemporary) creation from the perspective of rhetoric and affection theory.

A close connection between the rhetorical figure and the affections appears in Bach's *Orgelbüchlein.* The set of 46 Chorale preludes for organ, BWV 599-644, constitute a veritable dictionary of expressive constants that can be found in the religious or even secular works composed by Bach. *Orgelbüchlein* is, at the same time, a compositional treatise, a collection of organ music, an organ method, and a "theological statement". These four aspects are connected in such a way that it becomes difficult to establish a clear boundary between them (Stinson 1999, 25).

Among the relevant features of the style of these preludes are (Williams 2003, 236):

- four-voices texture;
- chorale melody with function of *cantus firmus,* placed on the soprano;
- imitative counterpoint with figures derived from *cantus,* to the other three voices*.*

Researchers agree that most of the preludes that make up this cycle are based on recurrent motifs (Brinkman 1980, 46), in agreement with the affections determined by the text of the Lutheran choral. In this sense, certain melodic-rhythmic profiles, which act with the force of some constants, could be extracted and classified.

2.1. Melodic constants
2.1.1. Gradual melodic profiles

- With descendant sense (*catabasis*):

The figure is associated with the metaphor of language that expresses predominantly negative feelings. It is represented by the downward direction of the melodic movement, the direction from heaven to earth, or from earth to grave. By analogy, descendant melodic movements suggest sadness, depression, humiliation, weakness, prayer, etc. The movement from heaven to earth (*descent of angels*) usually associates with a major tonality, and the descent into the grave is associated with a minor tone. In this sense, even the titles of the chorales that appeal to such musical symbols, become illustrative, such as the BWV 607, *Von Himmel kam der Engel Scharr* (The angelic crowd came from heaven).

Fig. 1. *Catabasis* (*Von Himmel kam der Engel Scharr*)

A series of chorales from *Orgelbüchlein* follows this melodic profile, especially the Christmas chorales: BWV 606, *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her* (From above, I am coming here); BWV 608, *In dulci jubilo* (In sweet joy); BWV 612, *Wir Christenleut'* (We, Christian people).

Fig. 2. *Catabasis* (*Wir Christenleut'*)

• With ascendant sense (*anabasis*):

Scalar ascending fragments can also symbolize the inexorable life span, as in BWV 644, *Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig* (Ah, how vain and fugitive is life). Rapid ascending and descending passages above the bass octaves compare life with a path that appears and then disappears.

Fig. 3. *Anabasis* (*Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig*)

• Waving profile (*transitus, superjectio*):

The combination of the two forms, *anabasis-catabasis*, in a polyphonic deployment, expresses the oscillation of tense expectations, hopes (ascendant motives), and outcomes, consequences, or responses (descending motifs) as we meet in BWV 609, *Lobt Gott, Ihr Christen allzugleich* (Praise God, you Christians together).

Fig. 4. *Anabasis-catabasis trough transitus to bass and superjectio to tenor* (*Lobt Gott, Ihr Christen allzugleich*)

2.1.2. Mixed melodic profiles

• Gradual step motion followed by a tense leap (*circolo, antitheton*)

In Choral BWV 617, *Herr Gott, nun schleuß den Himmel auf* (Lord, open your Heaven for me), the bass octave ranges suggest, according to the text, the idea of an opening to Heaven. The tenor counterpoints in a rhythmic continuum, making a

circular motion – *circolo mezzo* – around the neighboring sounds of the tonic chord (*A – E – C#*), followed by arpeggio.

Fig. 5. *Gradual step motion – leap* (*Herr Gott, nun schleuß den Himmel auf*)

The well-known tenor figure sometimes becomes, with Bach, a theme for the fugue (*Well-Tempered Clavier,* B sharp major, II / 21):
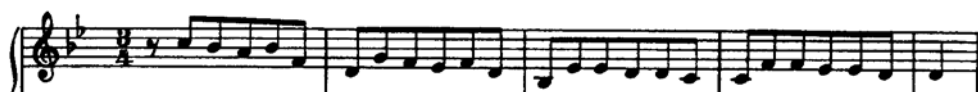

Fig. 6. *Circolo mezzo* (*Fugue WTC II/1*)

- Dissonant leaps

Often, the leaps bring into the melody dissonant intervals, such as fourth, fifths, and sevenths – increased or decreased (*saltus duriusculus*). When intervals are major or enlarged, they evoke struggle, victory, and joy; when they are minor or diminished they evoke pain, struggle, agony, torment, corruption, prayer, begging, and death. These are some interpretations that need to be adapted to musical work, text, and context. Some intervals are considered very harsh, tough, (such as *A-D#* or *B-F#*): these are called "intervals of death". Later, they were called "mystical" by composers like A. Scriabin.

Fig. 7. *Saltus duriusculus* (*In dich hab 'ich gehoffet, Herr*)

Choral BWV 640 *In dich hab 'ich gehoffet, Herr* (I have hoped for you, Lord), presented before, is an illustration of the use of the figure *saltus duriusculus*
The well-known BWV 637, *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt* (Through the fall of Adam, everything is corrupted), illustrates the expulsion of Adam from heaven after sin committed, by multiplying the figure *saltus duriusculus* to all voices (diminished/augmented fourth and fifths, false relations). The bass contains expressive minor and diminished sevenths, accompanying the motif that descends progressively into the abyss of the grave register. This is how "the fall of Adam" is allegorized, his degradation (Bukofzer 1939, 9).

Fig. 8. *Saltus duriusculus* (*Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt*)

2.1.3. Chromatized melodic profiles

• Chromatized melodic profiles (*passus duriusculus*)

Chromatic sequence *passus duriusculus* expresses sadness in descending form *(affectus tristitiae)*, depression, despair, pain, etc. It is very common since the fifteenth century (for example in Gesualdo's madrigals). In ascending form it is less painful, describing the difficulty of climbing, moving upward, or prefiguring the hope, the joy associated with the birth of Christ. The ascending form of the figure *passus duriusculus* is also found in BWV 614, *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist* (The old year left).

Fig. 9. *Passus duriusculus* (*Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*)

• Descriptive melodic profiles (*hypotyposis***)**

Here are those musical profiles that suggest prototypical objects (*hypotyposis*). These are sequences of sounds that have a strong suggestive force, achieved by associating with vivid visual or auditory images. The best known visual example is the figure (motif) of the cross. The broken cross symbol may be a graphic detail of the Christmas star. In choral BWV 601, *Herr Christ, der einge Gottes-Sohn* (The Lord Jesus Christ, son of God), the musical figure corresponds to the text, "He is the star of the morning, shining in the distance, clearly exceeding the other stars". The most descriptive chorale, which multiplies this symbolic motif of the Cross of Christ, is the Chorale BWV 625, *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (Christ is in bondage to death).

Fig. 10. *The figure of the cross* (*Christ lag in Todesbanden*)

2.2. Rhythmic constants

Since ancient Greece, poets have developed theories about the affective force of rhythm, theories perpetuated in the Renaissance and the Baroque periods. The rhythmic hesitations resulting from the breaks of regular rhythms by pausing intervals suggest uncertainty, doubt, fear, anxiety or anger (*pausa, suspiratio, tmesis* etc.). The accumulation of durations, syncopation can cause the same sensations due to the instability created with respect to the meter. The effect of instability increases if, at the same time, there is a bass that follows normal metric accentuation. Syncopation is also used willingly in dancing to give a character of joy, agility (*dubitatio, extensio, syncopatio*). The use of augmentation or diminution induces strong feelings of persuasion, especially in the fugue or chorale arrangement (*schematoides, diminutio*). The punctuated rhythm suggests solemnity, majesty (*ouverture à la française*). Repeated notes suggest strength, stability (*bombus, bombs, bombilans*). This figure may have different interpretations, depending on the speed of repetition, the number of sounds, the

register etc. The dactyl or the anapest (*corta*) have meanings such as: sad, depressed, tense (dactyl), or elegant, stable (anapest).

3. Conclusions

A number of musical elements have been developed over the centuries and have acquired a distinctive symbolic and expressive force. They have become musical figures recognized by the audience of the past centuries and are still used today in various types of music. These elements are based on expressive constants or metaphors in the sphere of language. These symbolic expressions reached the climax of the late Baroque period in Bach's works, especially in cantatas, as in the cycle *Orgelbüchlein*.

German musicologist Arnold Schmitz (1893-1980) stated that "who does not understand Bach's language through the symbolic meaning of rhetoric cannot pervade his creation" (Toduţă 1973, 80).

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