

Musical-Rhetorical Figures illustrated in Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the field of musical rhetoric. After a brief illustration of several rhetorical concepts from the Baroque period, rhetorical figures are highlighted within the comprehensive framework of traditional rhetoric. The transfer from rhetorical devices to musical-rhetorical figures is thus emphasized by analogy with the specific musical language. The most consistent part of the current paper, the analysis of musical figures, uses examples from 'Matthäus-Passion'. These are divided into seven distinct categories: figures of melodic repetition, figures of harmonic repetition (fugal figures), figures of representation and depiction, figures of dissonance and displacement, figures of interruption and silence, figures of melodic and harmonic ornamentation, miscellaneous figures.*

Keywords: *rhetoric, rhetorical figures, musical figures, affective states*

1. Introduction

Musicologists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stated that music had emotional and formative dimensions. In this sense they relied on the rational interpretation of the teachings related to the ancient Greek ethos. It is noteworthy that, along with the growing rational importance of music, *rhetoric*, a subject which promoted affective states and musical-rhetorical figures, had a major significance.

Johann Mattheson concluded in 1739 that 'Where there is no passion, no affect, there is no virtue.' (Lenneberg 1958, 47-48).

During the early Baroque period, musical-rhetorical figures were associated with *ornatus*, which meant a deviation from the simple, traditional norm in the quest for variety and colour (Bartel 1997, 49). The late Baroque style is

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distinguished by a new meaning-*movere*-, thus defining figures as the driving forces behind affective states. As a result, there appears to be a rather emotional understanding of musical figures as opposed to a strictly ornamental one. Therefore, rhetoric has evolved from a Roman, strictly academic discipline into a psychological examination of the correspondence between musical-literary language and affective states.

The large number of music treatises and authors - Eggbrecht mentions 17 authors and 27 treatises – rely, some more heavily than others, on Burmeister's paper, *Figurenlehre*. The general preoccupation with approaching music through rhetoric is thus certified. There are rather different opinions on musical figures, ranging from establishing a primordial role in identifying dissonance and culminating with a main part in expressing emotion. Despite the fact that there are various beliefs, one can argue that there are fundamental common features for all figures.

Gottsched and Scheibe emphasize the fact that the figures represent a genuine language of affective states. The literary arsenal as well as the musical one are derived from the same source of affective states, which are responsible for all human expression. The text is no longer considered the origin of the musical figure, the emotion inside the text takes over. This new vision facilitates a natural transfer of musical figures to instrumental music, surpassing the initial focus on the text message in vocal music.

2. Identification of musical figures in rhetoric

Joachim Burmeister, the author of *Musica Poetica*, the first paper promoting the German Baroque, illustrates the symbiotic relationship between music and rhetoric (Bartel 1997, 19).

In order to accurately establish the role played by musical figures within the framework of rhetoric we need to identify the five canons of classical rhetoric:

- *Inventio* – represents the delimitation of the subject and the search for information;
- *Dispositio* – focuses on ordering arguments;
- *Elocutio* – choosing the right words and sentences for expressing ideas and thoughts;
- *Memoria* – keeping the discourse in mind;
- *Actio* – efficient delivery.

If we analyse *elocutio*, we shall notice the following 4 features:

- the correctness of language (*puritas latinitas*);
- the clarity (*perspecuitas*);
- the figurative language (*ornatus*);
- the adequate content (*aptum decorum*).

The third feature, the figurative language (*ornatus*), naturally encompass *rhetorical figures* (Bartel 1997, 49). This term was used to refer to any form of verbal expression and had an intentionally different meaning.

Therefore, the verbal expression renders an illusory meaning and becomes the implicit image of something that has not been directly expressed. This particular sense of the *rhetorical figure* will be later transferred to music, as a *musical figure*, which, due to its unique structure, becomes an expression of the text imagery and a source of feelings conveyed by the writer. The musical figures can stimulate and even trigger different emotions.

The modern musicology has reached certain convergent opinions on the categorization of musical figures based on specific musical parameters. There are more than 100 musical figures, but, as some of them are similar, there are still 93 musical figures which are taken as references and divided as follows:

Table 1

<i>Categories of musical figures</i>		
No.	Musical figures	Number of specimens
1.	Figures of melodic repetition	15
2.	Figures of harmonic repetition (fugal figures)	10
3.	Figures of representation and depiction	15
4.	Figures of dissonance and displacement	27
5.	Figures of interruption and silence	7
6.	Figures of melodic and harmonic ornamentation	15
7.	Miscellaneous figures	14

3. Musical figures illustrated in Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*

We will not be able to analyse each musical figure due to lack of space, however, the most representative musical figures from each category will be illustrated and explained. Specific excerpts from Bach's *Matthäus-Passion* have been chosen in order to highlight these musical figures.

3.1. Figures of melodic repetition

– *Epizeuxis* – a repetition of a sound, motive or phrase, contributing to the emphasis of an idea. A motive consisting of one ascending triplet and one descending triplet is illustrated by two *oboe d’amore* in No. 18, Recitative. A winding road is thus illustrated, which depicts the interpreter’s emotional trauma singing the pain felt when Jesus was caught and tortured (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. *Epizeuxis*

– *Anaphora, Repetitio* – the repetition of an initial phrase or of a motive in consecutive passages. The oboe in No. 26, Aria initiates a melodic motive sung twice by the tenor, in consecutive phrases, using the words: ‘I will watch beside my Jesus’, which is suggestive of the firm decision to stand by Jesus (Figure 2).

26 ARIA. Coro I. II.
Andante.
Oboe.
s.
8
Ich will bei meinem Je - - - su

Fig. 2. *Anaphora*

– *Climax, Gradatio* – gradually rising intensity sound, culminating in the main maximum. There is a gradual construction in No. 17, Recitative-The Last Supper, which reaches a climax with the hopeful message delivered by Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven awaiting the faithful believers (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Climax

The musical score for Figure 3 shows four staves: Violin I (Vl.), Violin II (Vla.), Jesus (Jes.), and Cantata (Cant.). The lyrics for the Jesus part are: "Tag, da ich's neu trin-ken wer-de mit euch in mei-nes Va-ters Reich." Below the Cantata staff, there is a figured bass line with the following figures: 7 6 6 — 7 6 6 6 5 — 9 8 6 6 6 5.

Fig. 3. Climax

3.2. Figures of harmonic repetition (*fugal figures*)

– *Paronomasia* – the harmonic repetition with specific alterations in order to emphasize the message (see Fig. 4). In No. 15, Recitative (Chorus) the four voices represent the apostles, who are appalled at the news that one of them is the traitor and ask Jesus the following obstinately repeated question: 'Lord, is it I?' The voices in stretto create a very dynamic polyphonic effect with such powerful connotations that not even Kirkegaard could have depicted such a convincing feeling (Bloch 1985, 34).

Fig. 4. Paronomasia

The musical score for Figure 4 shows four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenore, and Basso. The lyrics are: "Herr, bin ich's, bin ich's, bin ich's, bin ich's, Herr, bin ich's, bin ich's, Herr, bin ich's, bin ich's, Herr, bin ich's, bin ich's, Herr, bin ich's, bin ich's." The Tenore part includes the instruction "(Ev.) Tutti" and the number "8" below the staff.

Fig. 4. Paronomasia

– *Mimesis* – a free imitation at different intervals. There is an example to illustrate this, such as the stretto between the soprano and tenor in No. 73, Recitative (Chorus) where, even the Roman prosecutors admit, having their emotions stirred by erratic nature: 'Truly, this was the Son of God' (Figure 5).

Soprano. Wahrlich, die - - ser ist Got-tes Sohn ge - we -

Alto. Wahrlich, die - - ser ist Got-tes Sohn ge - we -

Tenore. Wahrlich, wahrlich, dieser ist Got - tes Sohn ge - we -

Basso. Wahrlich, die - - ser ist Got-tes Sohn ge - we -

Fig. 5. *Mimesis*

3.3. Figures of representation and depiction

– *Exclamatio* – a musical exclamation, usually associated with an exclamation from the text. Jesus, disappointed by the helplessness of his disciples, exclaims: ‘Couldst not thou watch one hour?’ (Figure 6).

Jes. Ach! wollt ihr nun schlafen und ruhen? Sie-he,

Fig. 6. *Exclamatio*

– *Anabasis, Ascensus* – an ascending musical passage which expresses exalted images or positive feelings. Since Bach surely knew the spiritual connotation associated with the Baroque bass, it is well-worth noticing this particular instrument, which accurately reflects the ongoing events. Thus, right at the beginning, in the opening chorus, the bass renders this musical figure, as a moral support of what was about to happen, the work of providence represented here by the Holy Spirit (Figure 7).

Cnt.

Fig. 7. *Anabasis*

– *Catabasis, Descensus* – a descending musical passage, which reflects a sombre atmosphere or negative feelings (see Fig. 8). In No. 71, Recitative there is such a passage depicting the death of Jesus and catabasis becomes a frequently used musical figure for the final cadences of the Recitatives (Kubik 2009, 14).

Fig. 8. *Catabasis*

– *Noema* – a homophonic passage within a polyphonic composition used to emphasize a concept. Noema is focused on consonants, creating pure sonorities. There are numerous such figures in the paper under discussion, figures which are more ample such as the one in No. 3, Chorale (Figure 9).

Fig. 9. *Noema*

3.4. Figures of dissonance and displacement

– *Passus duriusculus* – a chromatically altered ascending or descending melodic line. With the help of the bass, the figure highlights the dramatic final lines of No. 31, Chorale : ‘Who trusts firmly in God, builds firmly on him, He will not forsake him.’ (see Figure 10).

S. auf ihn baut, den will er nicht ver - las

A.

T. auf ihn baut, den will er nicht ver - las

B.

Cnt. 6 5 6 6 6 6 6

Fig. 10. *Passus duriusculus*

– *Saltus duriusculus* – a dissonant leap, for instance the diminished seventh, which emphasizes certain major events. In No. 22, Recitative, Jesus warns Peter that he will betray Him three times in that ill-fated evening and this warning is rendered by a diminished seventh (Figure 11).

Vl.

Vla.

Jes. o - he der Hahn krä-het, wirst du mich drei - mal ver-leug-nen.

Cnt. 6 6 6 6

Fig. 11. *Saltus duriusculus*

3.5. Figures of interruption and silence

– *Suspiratio, Stenasmus* – the musical expression of a sigh through a rest. In No. 71, Recitative, Matthew the Evangelist speaks of the death of Jesus. After a consonant leap, following the cry of Jesus, Bach highlights the sigh through a rest which also marks the passing over of Jesus (Figure 12).

Fig. 12. *Suspiratio*

– *Tmesis* – a fragmentation, an incision requested by the text through rests. Each page contains rests with expressive valence. For instance, in No. 70, Aria, where there is a dialogue between the soloist-who invites the crowd to come to Jesus-and the chorus representing the crowd, the chorus asks ‘Where?’(should we go-A/N), and the soloist answers: ‘In Jesus’ arms’ (Figure 13).

Fig. 13. *Tmesis*

3.6. Figures of melodic and harmonic ornamentation

– *Tremolo, Trillo* – a rapid alternation of two adjacent notes. In No. 70, Aria, the oboe *da caccia* renders an ornamental composition with trills and moving words describing Jesus with his arms outstretched, nailed to the cross, as if embracing a guilty world (Figure 14).

Fig. 14 *Tremolo, trillo*

– *Bombus, bombis, bombilans* – four identical notes in rapid succession. In No. 25, Recitative Tenor and Chorus, continuo illustrates such figures, as if to heighten suspense; ‘Oh, pain!’ depicts Jesus’ torment in the garden of Gethsemane (Figure15).

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Tenore Solo and Organo e Continuo. The Tenore Solo part is in G minor and features a recitative style with lyrics 'O Schmerz! hier zit-tert das ge-quälte'. The Organo e Continuo part is in G minor and features a rapid, repetitive figure of four identical notes (G, Bb, D, F) in a descending sequence, marked 'pianissimo'. The organ part includes fingering numbers (2, 1, 5, 4, 2) and a '2' below the final measure.

Fig. 15. *Bombus, bombis, bombilans*

4. Conclusions

Bach perfected his own system of illustrating intentional feelings with an overwhelming power. To be more specific, the musical hermeneutics and the whole rhetorical arsenal help Bach render through a subjective art such as music a meaning consistent with the message, using his own system of codes and interpretations (Butt 2010, 147). What is essential is that sacred music increases its power of persuasion using rhetorical figures.

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