Musical Rhetoric as basis for an expressive and meaningful performance in Baroque repertoire. Case study: *The Great Mass in B Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach

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Abstract: *The article aims to emphasize the role of the musical rhetoric in understanding aesthetic ideals of Baroque period and to reveal how it works as basis for decisions regarding the performance. Previous investigations during the 20th century were largely focused on reconstructing the "authentic" sound. The outcomes were useful in determining how to perform the notes written in the score. This paper is based on a complementary opposite approach that starts from the analysis of the notes written in the score. It will be shown by examples of rhetorical exegesis on extracts from Bach's Mass in B minor how the musicians are enhanced with tremendous ideas for a meaningful, moving, and enchanting performance.*

Key-words: *Musical Rhetoric, Early music, historically informed performance, Bach*

1. Introduction

Musical performers and musicologists of the 20th century showed an increasing interest in Early music. Extensive investigations brought to light valuable knowledge for the historically informed performance (HIP). Based on these outcomes, the idea of performing Baroque music in romantic style was reconsidered. Wide range of undulating dynamics, frequent modifications of tempo, legato articulation, long or never-ending phrases, large-scale patterns of tension and release, dramatic climaxes with emphasis of suspensions and dissonances, specific *sostenuto* sound of large musical ensembles were generally accepted as romantic traits (Fabian 2003, 131; Stravinsky 1947, 124-125) and became questionable in relation to Baroque compositions.

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In the beginning of the 20th century, HIP musicians have been mainly concerned with reconstructing the original sound. They used restored or replicated period instruments (harpsichord, violins with Baroque bow and gut strings, viola da gamba, viola d`amore, recorder, natural horns and trumpets, etc.), started to use the Baroque tuning, and preferred smaller ensembles. Paul Hindemith and Nikolaus Harnoncourt were among the pioneers of HIP movement who played on period instruments.

On the other hand, critics have considered that HIP musicians focused mainly on technical means rather than aesthetical ends, neglecting the fact that performers should seek to transmit to the listeners the expressive effect intended by the composers (Taruskin 1995, 99).

In this context, researchers brought to light the musical rhetoric and its fundamental role in the art of composition. The doctrine of affects reached its culmination during the late Baroque period and the musical-rhetorical figures were considered the language of the affects.

In 1908 Arnold Schering published the first article in which he made an appeal to study the musical-rhetorical figures (Schering, 1908). The contributions of Heinz Brandes (1935), Hans-Heinrich Unger (1941), Willibald Gurlitt (1944) and Arnold Schmitz (1950) are also remarkable. They studied the Baroque treaties and carried out considerable work in organizing the musical-rhetorical figures in different categories. However, Dietrich Bartel (1997) realized a detailed and complete catalog of musical-rhetorical figures. His treaty comprises the semantic evolution of the name of each figure based on the definitions given by the theorists.

2. Musical rhetoric and performing practice

For the Baroque composers, especially in Germany, composing and performing a musical work was similar to the process of preparing and presenting an oral speech, respecting the stages of *inventio* (the invention of the idea), *dispositio* (the arrangement of the idea into sections), *decoratio* (the elaboration of the idea), *memoria* (recalling the arguments/memorizing the discourse) and *pronuntiatio* (the performance of discourse production). Four main approaches explain the application of the rhetorical principles in musical performance (Golomb 2004, 85-91).

2.1. Rhetoric as ornament

The concern for ornamentation is closely related to the stage *decoratio*. Today`s notion of ornament may suggest the idea of an optional element, less important or

significant. However, the Baroque treatises give it a fundamental role for the expression and arousal of the affects. Attention paid to the detailed decoration was supposed to make a delightful performance.

2.2. Rhetoric as structure

HIP musicians who adhere to this orientation seek to figure out the shaping of complete movements or works through the musical-rhetorical figures. They also look for the sections *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (telling the facts), *divisio* or *propositio* (presenting the speaker`s thesis), *confirmatio* (presenting the main arguments supporting the thesis), *confutatio* (opposing counterarguments) and *peroratio* or *conclusio* (conclusion) as part of *divisio* stage.

　　　While the other approaches pay attention to details, this orientation saves the performers from losing the fluency by giving them the big picture. Besides, the rhetorical analysis of music structure gives to performers insights regarding the climax and relaxation points that can also be suggestive for extra-musical meanings.

2.3. Rhetoric as semantics

This view holds that the musical figures contain extra-musical meanings similar to Wagnerian Leitmotifs. For instance, it was assumed that the ascending minor sixth represents the invocation of divinity (as in *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* from Bach`s Matthäuspassion) or a certain descending melodic line suggests the loss of paradise and the fall into sin. The same motivation aroused the interest in discovering the meanings of numerology in Bachian scores.

　　　It should be noted that the musical-rhetorical figures do not specifically indicate extra-musical meanings or affects. They are compositional techniques such as chromatic notes, repetition, sequencing, inversion, etc. therefore it is not possible to reconstruct a musical vocabulary with strict correspondences in the sphere of meanings and affects. At the same time, it is true that composers often decide to select systematically certain rhetorical devices in connection with specific contexts creating in this way a link to affects and/or specific extra-musical content. Thus, the performance becomes more expressive and meaningful.

2.4. Rhetoric as speech

It assumes that the musical discourse is similar to the oral speech with clear pronunciation. If the music has also a text, the musical performance should follow the natural pronunciation of the words and carry their affects (Sandu-Dediu1996-

1997, 371). The phrases are shaped on small units. Large-scale sections are built up just as an oral discourse is formed by every word.

Regarding the rhythm, the similarity with the oral speech involves the alternation of the strong and weak beats as an imitation of the stressed and unstressed syllables of the words.

At the same time, the wave-like performance specific to the oral discourse is contrary to the notion of terraced dynamics (Lawson and Stowell 1999, 53-54). It must be mentioned that some of the late Baroque theorists (Johann Adolph Scheibe and Johann Nikolaus Forkel) include in their treatises progressive nuances and associate them with the musical-rhetorical figure *gradatio* (Bartel 1997, 220-224). This is a valuable hint that the melodic discourse shapes also the dynamics.

This approach is probably "the least controversial and the most influential" (Golomb 2004, 92). Its characteristics lead to an expressivity in performance that is different from romantic tradition.

3. Rhetorical exegesis and performance

Bach wrote his Mass in B minor in the late Baroque period. It is therefore a valuable example of work for rhetorical analysis.

3.1. Kyrie I – Introductory bars and main theme

In the first four introductory bars, the harmonic progression from the tonic chord to the dominant through chromatic chords represents and elicits strong affects (*pathopoeia* and *incrementum*). Soprano 1 draws a gradually ascending melodic line (*gradatio*). The last syllable of each motif is one step higher than its beginning and is followed by a pause (*interrogatio*). The motif of the first bar is repeated in the second bar and exposed completely in the last two bars - *anaphora*. The polyphonic inserts (*mimesis*) determine a rhythmic intensification - choral voices on the pulse of quaver and *transitus* at first violin, *corta recta* and *corta inversa* (soprano 1 and alto) on the pulse of semiquaver. The descending figure at first violin in the fourth bar consists of semiquavers slurred two by two (*accentus remitens* or *polysyndeton*).

The ascending melody, the rhythmic and harmonic progression, and the repetitive process generate an increasing tension at all levels. As a result, the emphatic repetition (*epizeuxis*) of the text *Kyrie eleison* gets dramatic value (*paronomasia*). This section is composed by three massive blocks of sound linked together by the ascending figures (*anabasis*, *exclamatio*) of soprano 1 and 2. The alternation between the sound of the full ensemble and single voices create a huge

contrast (*antithesis*). The intervention of soprano 1 and 2 are placed in the general pauses (*aposiopesis*) that separate the three sound blocks. They are imitated by other voices within the sound blocks (*mimesis*).

The use of the whole ensemble in the beginning, the message of the text, and the indication *Largo ed un poco piano* in bar 5 suggest that the piece starts in *forte* or *fortissimo*. However, the energy should be preserved for the bars 3-4 where the tension increases at all levels. On the other hand, considering all the small figures condensed in this small phrase, a large ensemble, typical to 19th century would not be suitable. Attention to detail in performance means aiming to articulate clearly the figures described above with all their accents and imitations. A similar rhetorical discourse can be found around the climax of this movement (bars 101-102). This implies undoubtedly a dynamic culmination, although it is not typical for a Baroque score to indicate it.

The profile of the main theme (bars 5-8) is gradual ascendent (*gradatio*). The first motif begins with the repetition of the first sound (*epizeuxis*) and continues with a rising melody that is broken by the figure G-F-sharp in the lower register. These interruptions are perceived as sighs (*suspiratio*) that prevent the ascending melody. The ascension from B to E implies each time the repetition of the previous sound [B] - [B-C] - [C-D] - [D-sharp-E] (*anadiplosis* and *interrogatio*). In the second motif, there is a change of the melodic path and diatonic mode change to chromatic (*mutatio per genus* and *pathopoeia*). The rhythm is intensified with shorter notes and gets unpredictable (*syncopa*, *corta inversa*). At the same time, the harmony becomes chromatic and unstable (*dubitatio*).

The tension reaches its climax in the next bar through the ascending interval A-sharp - G (*saltus duriusculus* and *consonantiae impropriae*) on the dominant chord. A gradually descending melodic line follows this figure. It fills the interval and brings back the B minor chord restoring the harmonic balance. The last motif of the theme consists of *salto semplice* and *syncopatio* restoring also the rhythmic balance by values of crochet and minim.

Taking into performance these considerations, it should be noted that *epizeuxis* is rarely static. In this case, it stands for the word *Kyrie*. Therefore, it should have an accent followed by diminuendo, just as in the oral pronunciation. *Gradatio* determines a rising of the nuance and the *suspiratio* that breaks the melodic ascension involves a non-legato articulation so that the listeners should perceive the sigh effect and affect. The tension grows towards *pathopoeia* and *saltus duriusculus* which needs to be emphasized through the means of dynamics. According to this analysis, the long *legato* and *sostenuto* with equalized beats has no rhetorical support, although it might be preferable to performers accustomed with romantic tradition.

3.2. Et in terra pax

This is the only piece within the whole work that is clearly structured according to the component sections in a rhetorical speech. The introductory section (m. 101-120) – *exordium*; the exposition (bars 121-134) – *narratio*; episode and development 1 (bars 135-1431/2) – *divisio*; re-exposition (bars 1431/2 - 159) – *confirmatio*; development 2 (bars 160-1701/2) – *confutatio*; returning to opening key (bars 1701/2 - 176) – *conclusio* (*peroratio*).

There is a huge contrast (*antithesis*) between the beginning of this piece and the character of the previous one. *Et in terra pax* starts with the choral voices accompanied just by the basso continuo suggesting a dynamic contrast from *forte* to *piano*. In *Gloria,* the melodic leaps (*salto semplice* and *salti composti*) are frequent and create an atmosphere of exuberance. On the contrary, in *Et in terra pax*, the main figures are *gradatio*, *subsumptio*, *polysyndeton* and *tirata* suggesting peace.

Occasionally, the melodic leaps occur as rays of light or exclamations of joy in the first counter-subject of the theme as indicated in Figure 1. It involves a wave-like tension path and diverse dynamics drawn according to the melodic profile.
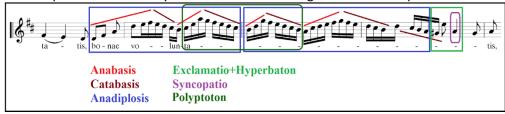

Fig. 1. *Rhetorical figures in fist counter-subject - Et in terra pax*

3.3. Domine Deus

In the introduction, the flute solo plays a theme repeated by first violin at the same pitch (*palilogia*). This has ornaments like *corta recta*, *subsumptio*, *polysyndeton* and *retardatio*. Bach has notated the Lombard rhythm in some of the parts of Dresden manuscripts as shown in Figure 2. This indicates that the practice of performing unequal notes was common although not written each time in the scores.
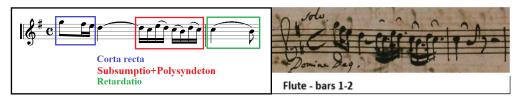

Fig. 2. *Introductory theme - bars 1-2 - Domine Deus*

3.4. Crucifixus

In the first section of the piece (bars 1-36), the word "crucifixus" is built out of the figures *epizeuxis* and *Vorschlag* which requires the phrasing on small units. Each repeated sound should be more intense, until the prosodic accent that coincides with the *Vorschalg* on the strong beat in the next bar. The figure *tmesis* requires the fragmentation of the word into separate syllables through the non-legato articulation. This interpretation is also supported by the presence of *suspiratio* in the instrumental layer of the music.

In the second section of the piece (bars 37-53), the bar 45 stands as a climax of figure *paronomasia*. The layer of sound grows by adding voices from bar 37. The imitations increase the rhythmic and harmonic tensions supported by the ground bass (*anaphora*) that follow a *passus duriusculus* model. Therefore, this tensional path needs to be revealed by dynamics. The relaxation zone reaches the end of the piece where the voices get to the lowest possible register, suggesting the laying in the tomb of Christ's body (*assimilatio*).

3.5. Confiteor – Adagio section

The fragment Adagio stands as a slow transition between the pieces *Confiteor* and *Et expecto*. The abundance of seventh chords (*consonantiae impropriae*) places the music in an area of uncertainty and mystery (*dubitatio*). It is also specific to the rhetorical figure *suspensio* – an introduction that initially hides the character of the piece and reveals it gradually and discreetly. The chromatic descent in the bass line (*passus duriusculus*) in bars 121-131 passed to the soprano 1 in bars 132-136 emphasize the feelings of fear, doubt, and even sorrow. The Adagio starts from the key of D major in bar 123 and ends with a Phrygian cadence on the dominant chord in bar 146 (*interrogatio*).

The tempo should allow enough space for the harmonic tensions to make their effect. The presence of figures *dubitatio*, *interrogatio* and *passus duriusculus* suggest small waving nuances. Otherwise, an objective and rigid performance risks to become wholly unconvincing (Golomb 2017, 60; Dreyfus 1983, 302).

3.6. *Antithesis* figure as structural element

The contrasts have the ability to draw the listeners' attention and to become reference points in their mind. In this work, Bach made use of *Antithesis* in places that are important markers within the overall structure.

The first piece and the last piece of the section *Gloria* are delimitated through *antithesis*. The piece *Gloria* begins with full orchestra (including trumpets and timpani) in a modern style of composition after *Second Kyrie* written in *stile antico*. Tempo Vivace and the semiquaver pulse contrast with the spirit of previous piece. Unlike the gradual movement of voices in *Second Kyrie*, the thematic material in *Gloria* consists mostly of melodic leaps with a general ascendent profile (*salti composti*, *salto semplice*, *anabasis*). By similar means, the contrast between *Gloria* and *Et in terra pax* expresses the complementary-opposite moods: the joy of angels in heaven and the peace on earth (*assimilatio*). In a similar way, the last piece of *Gloria*, *Cum Santo Spiritu* uses the whole ensemble, it is a modern Baroque dance and it contrasts with the previous piece, an aria for the bass solo.

The most astonishing *antithesis* of the whole work is probably the contrast between *Crucifixus* and *Et resurrexit* where the death of Christ and His resurrection stand in opposition by all musical means. *Catabasis* in the last bars *Crucifixus* and *anabasis* in *Et resurrexit*, illustrating the power of resurrection. *Passus duriusculus*, *hypotyposis*, *tmesis*, *suspiratio*, *catabasis* create a dramatic and sorrowful mood in *Crucifixus* which fits in the *passacaglia* pattern. On the contrary, *anabasis*, *salti composti* and *exclamatio* are the figures that exalt the music in *Et resurrexit* which is written in a dance-like style.

This pattern is repeated in the case of transition between *Confiteor* and *Et expecto*. The anguish of human uncertainty of the Adagio section discussed above contrasts with the certainty of divine promise regarding the resurrection in *Et expecto*. The thematic opposition is emphasized through musical means once again. The very fact that Bach creates this pattern around this theme suggests that he wanted the listener to associate these moments. His message is very clear and convincing: Christs's resurrection represents the model and the guarantee for the resurrection from the death of all believers (*assimilatio*). It is a good example that stands for the approach "rhetoric as semantics" in the Mass in B minor.

4. Conclusions

The name "rhetorical music" was proposed as an alternative to what is known as "early music", a phrase that designates "the essence of the musical spirit before the romantic revolution" (Haynes 2005, 12). The concern for the "authentic" sound should not be a purpose in itself, but the means by which the musical-rhetorical discourse can be delivered in the best conditions. In addition, the decision to use a limited ensemble should not be an attempt to imitate the conditions of the era, but the way to highlight the details that would be lost in a romantic mass of sound. In

other words, it is the score that determines the technical requirements of performance and not the other way around.

It should be remarked the complementarity of the two approaches. On one hand, a proper understanding of the composer's aesthetic ideals (significantly shaped by rhetoric) explains the motivations behind the technical recommendations. At the same time, a good knowledge of the original means of performance and their practice help to clarify the ambiguous statements about aesthetic ideals (Golomb 2008, 56-57).

The first half of the 20th century was marked by the objective performance of the Baroque repertoire with terraced dynamics and rigid tempos (Dreyfus 1983, 302-304). According to the 'rhetoric as semantics' as unique argument, the performers thought that the Baroque music carried its message through the rhetorical figures. Therefore, it should not be rendered expressively since it speaks for itself. This paper shows that the rhetorical understanding through all four approaches helps to find the proper way for a performance that is neither cold and objective nor expressive in a romantic manner, but expressive and meaningful, according to the purpose of the rhetoric: *docere*, *delectare*, and *movere*.

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