

Rhetoric, Gesture and Scenic Imagination in Bach's Music*

REINHOLD KUBIK and MARGIT LEGLER

Generalities

The observation that music is 'gestural' or contains 'rhetorical figures' is valid especially for Baroque music, although it applies also to other styles. It certainly applies to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In order to turn this observation into a pertinent statement about the music, one has to investigate its aesthetic and philosophical presuppositions as well as the historic ones. The aesthetic presuppositions are the general basis for the existence of gesture; the historic ones determine its concrete forms, which reflect the style of the period, on one hand, and the author's personal style, on the other.

Gesture has been part of oratory since Roman antiquity. Its place in the practice is described in treatises on rhetoric by Cicero, Quintilian and others: it occurs within the last step of elaborating a speech, in the *pronuntiatio* (or *actio*/delivery). *Pronuntiatio* has an acoustic component (*vox*/voice in Cicero, *pronuntiatio* in Quintilian) and a visual component (*motus*/movement in Cicero, *actio*/performance in Quintilian).¹

In rhetoric, each gesture happens in both time and space. Both component parts always exist together. This leads to the first problem, that of transferring the concept of gesture from rhetoric to music and vice-versa: in music 'time' is omnipresent, and the co-operation between tempo and rhythm is the basis of music, as it is in the declamation of a text. But how can we define 'space' in

* This contribution was presented as a lecture demonstration with a significant performance element, but is here reduced to an essay with illustrations. It is hoped that the inevitable loss of content can be tolerated.

¹ Generally on relations between music and rhetoric in early modern culture, see Blake Wilson, George J. Buelow and Peter A. Hoyt, 'Rhetoric and Music', in *Grove Music Online* (online resource, Oxford University Press, 2007-2009); Brian Vickers: 'Rhetoric and the Sister Arts', in *Defence of Rhetoric*, ed. B. Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 340-74; *idem*, 'Figures of Rhetoric/ Figures of Music?', *Rhetorica* 2 (1984), 1-44; Dietrich Bartel, *Musica poetica* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); reviewed by John Butt in *Early Music History* 18 (1999), 398-404.

music? Everyday language does apply spatial imaginations to music: we call a sound 'high' if it is of large frequency, and 'low' if the frequency is small. Nobody knows the reasons for that, but the terminology is common and accepted without discussion. This phenomenon is the reason why we can understand a composition in which 'heaven' and 'earth' are characterised with high and low notes, respectively.

It should also be kept in mind that both music and gesture know a variety of styles that differ in goal, expression and performative devices. These styles add a third dimension to those of time and space – a 'dynamic dimension', similar to that of forte and piano in music.

The ancient Roman treatises on rhetoric identify three styles: *stilus gravis* (serious, elevated style), *stilus mediocris* (intermediate style) and *stilus humilis* (humble, light style). All terms for literary styles, which appear later in the classical tradition, are based upon these three, even if they are modified and adapted.

In musical discourses between 1600 and 1800 we find the following terms, in particular:

- a. *Stilus theatralis* (*drammatico, rappresentativo, gravis*, etc.: serious style)
- b. *Stilus hyporchematicus* (*madrigalesco, symphonico*, etc.: intermediate style)
- c. *Stilus ecclesiasticus* (*da chiesa*, etc.: less expressive style)²

In the treatises on gesture a similar classification is found, e.g. in Gilbert Austin:³

- a. The *epic or tragic style* of delivery 'requires every natural and acquired power on the part of the speaker: and in its perfect execution is implied every excellence of the highest class.' (Austin, p. 452)
- b. The *rhetorical gesture or plain style* 'requires principally energy, variety, simplicity and precision' (Austin, p. 458)
- c. The *colloquial gesture or sublime style*, 'which is at the opposite extreme from epic, require[s] principally simplicity and grace. [...] the arm is barely detached from the side, and the elbow becomes the principal centre of motion.' (Austin, p. 458- 59). (See Fig. 1a-c)

² The *stylus ecclesiasticus* shares with the *stylus humilis* a restraint on the means of expression, although their purpose is different.

³ Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* [etc.] (London, 1806). Further on this work, see below.



Fig. 1a-c: 'Delight (pleasure)' in three styles.⁴

Gestures serve different reasons and purposes. This establishes a further classification: formal gestures; expressive gestures; semantic and imitative gestures.⁵

(a) Formal gestures

Formal gestures correspond to formal caesuras in the text, for example the beginning and end of a speech. Austin distinguishes the following varieties:⁶

- Commencing gesture* (to begin a discourse or division);
- Discriminating gesture, gestures of address* (to indicate persons or objects);
- Auxiliary, or alternate gesture* (a gesture made by the other hand);
- Suspended, or preparatory gesture* (to indicate a pause, or expectation);
- Terminating gesture* (hands are lowered to a resting position).

Austin also provides a practical example of a text which, when spoken, requires most of these formal gestures:

'It is an old observation, but not therefore the less true, that no man is wise at all times.'⁷

⁴ After Johann Jakob Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1785/86), ill. 29, 49 and 50, respectively.

⁵ Dene Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th-Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1987), pp. 26-87; Reinhard Strohm, 'Zur musikalischen Dramaturgie von *Arianna in Creta*', *Gattungskonventionen der Händel-Oper: Bericht über die Symposien 1990 und 1991* (Laaber: Laaber, 1992; Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Händel-Akademie Karlsruhe, 4), pp. 171-88, here 176-78.

⁶ Austin, *Chironomia* (n. 3 above), p. 387.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 393-94.

Music also uses formal devices that correspond to the formal structure of a text. Musical caesuras and cadences are applied in correspondence with textual punctuation marks. Thus a perfect cadence, for example, is comparable to a terminating gesture, as it corresponds to a full stop.

(b) *Expressive gestures*

Expressive gestures show the affections and feelings of the speaker, for example 'joy' or 'fear'. Such gestures often externalise inner feelings which cannot otherwise be seen; for example, the wringing of hands indicates 'pain'.

Music knows rhetorical figures which can express affections and feelings in a similar way. An example is the well-known figure of *passus duriusculus*. This figure consists of chromatic steps downward within the range of a fourth. It symbolises pain or similar adverse feelings.

(c) *Semantic and imitative gestures*

These gestures show a certain action or situation. It is in fact a special ability of gestures to turn invisible issues into visible signs. The first author to describe this function was Johann Jakob Engel. In his treatise, *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (Berlin, 1785), he offers two pertinent examples (see Fig. 2 and 3):⁸



Fig. 2: *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1: 'Ay, there's the rub'.

In the same moment Hamlet points with his finger, as if he saw something with his eyes, though he saw it only in his imagination.

⁸ Engel, *Ideen* (n. 4 above), following p. 86.



Fig. 3: *King Lear*, act 3, scene 4: 'O, that way madness lies; let me shun that; no more of that!'

As Lear speaks these words, there is no object from which he could turn his face and body away, but he does so nevertheless, banishing the bad recollections with this gesture.

In music it is quite usual to represent visible things acoustically, at least for the imagination of an experienced listener. There are many pieces that illustrate water, flames, wind, and so forth. This is only possible because of the ability of music to represent space, as mentioned above.

Sources

Before discussing Bach's music and its relationship to gesture, a few of the most important theoretical sources for the understanding of eighteenth-century gesture may be introduced. Between c. 1600 und c. 1900, the bibliography on acting techniques comprises more than 100 treatises. The following five treatises, which contain a particularly large amount of practical information, are the most suitable ones for the study or teaching of period gesture.

(a) John Bulwer, *Chironomia* (London, 1644) (see fig. 4a-b).



Fig. 4a: John Bulwer, *Chironomia*, title-page.

The title-page shows four Greek and Roman orators (Demosthenes, Andronicus, Roscius and Cicero) in action. Demosthenes, according to the legend, practises in front of a mirror.



Fig. 4b: Bulwer, *Chironomia*, illustration showing various hand-signs.

Bulwer was a medical doctor, who investigated communication between deaf people. Thus he concentrated on the signs of hands and fingers. The gestures he selected are based on similar ones described by Quintilian in the 1st century C. E. They were apparently commonly known, as can be seen in numerous paintings of the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

(b) Franciscus Lang, *Dissertatio de actione scenica* (Munich, 1727) (see fig. 5).

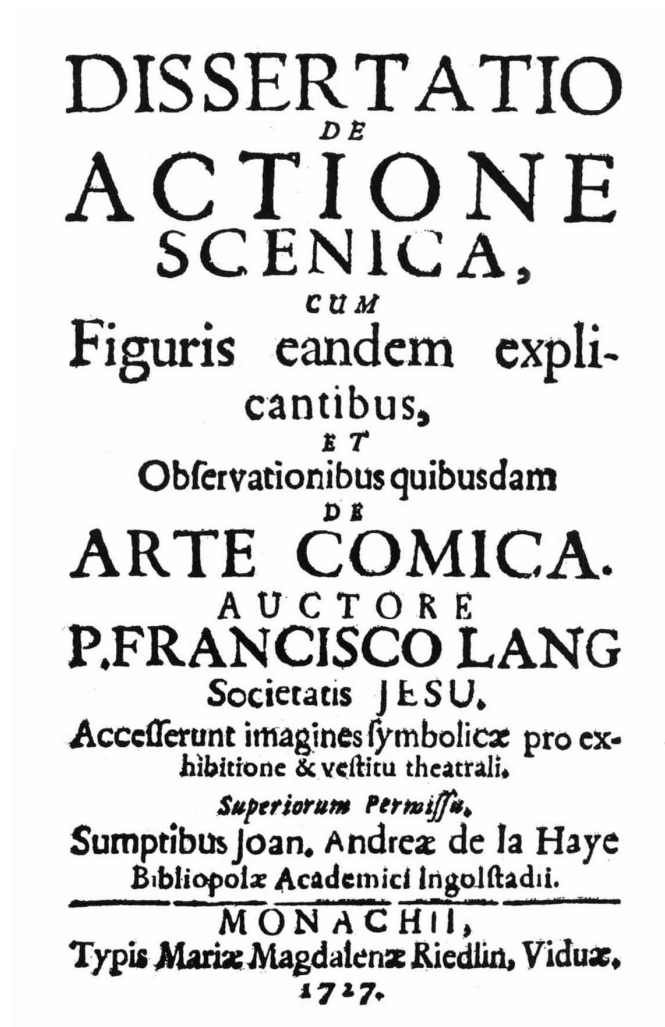


Fig. 5: Franciscus Lang, *Dissertatio de actione scenica*, title-page.

Lang was a teacher at the Jesuit College in Munich and wrote this Latin treatise for his acting pupils, after having spent almost half a century on practical instruction. The work was printed only after his death. It contains several illustrations and a comprehensive appendix with an alphabetical catalogue of the presentation of allegories on stage.

(c) Johann Jakob Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (Berlin, 1785) (see fig. 6).

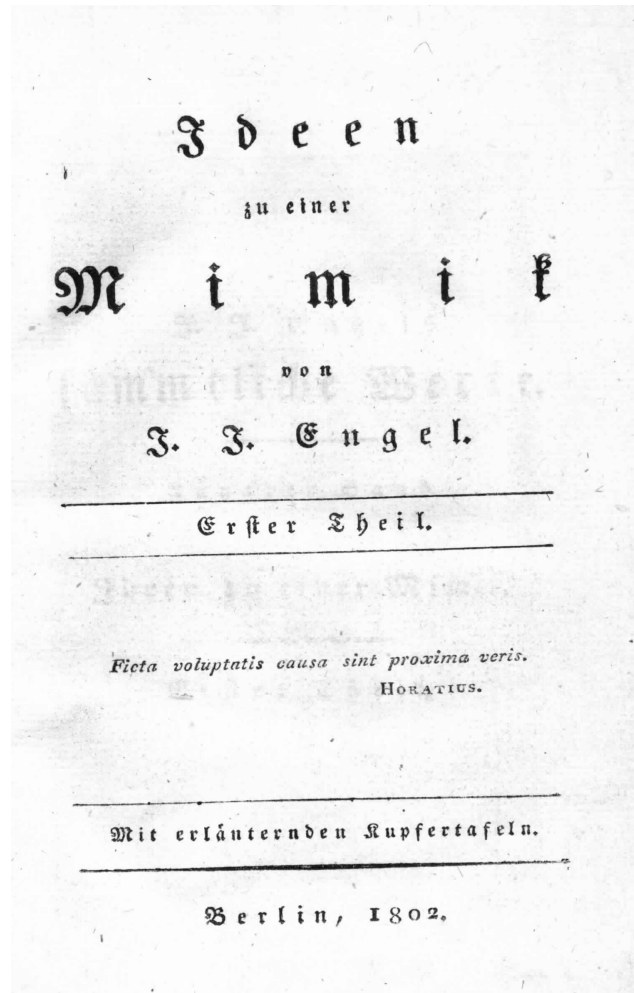


Fig. 6: Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, title-page.

This book describes the period acting techniques of the second half of the eighteenth century. Similarly to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who investigated the artistic role of the acting arts in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-69), Engel gives about 50 examples, two of which have been shown above (see fig. 3: Hamlet, and fig. 4: Lear).

(d) Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia: or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (London, 1806) (see fig. 7).

CHIRONOMIA;
OR A
TREATISE ON RHETORICAL DELIVERY:
COMPREHENDING MANY PRECEPTS, BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN, FOR
THE PROPER REGULATION OF
THE VOICE, THE COUNTENANCE, AND GESTURE.
TOGETHER WITH AN
INVESTIGATION OF THE ELEMENTS OF GESTURE,
AND
A NEW METHOD FOR THE NOTATION THEREOF;
ILLUSTRATED BY MANY FIGURES.

BY THE REVEREND GILBERT AUSTIN, A. M.

Et certe quod facere oporteat, non indignandum est discere, cum præsertim hæc *Chironomia*, quæ est (ut nomine ipso declaratur) *lex gestus*, et ab illis temporibus heroicis orta sit, et à summis Græciæ viris, et ab ipso etiam Socrate probata, à Platone quoque in parte civilium posita virtutum, et à Chrysippo in præceptis de *liberorum educatione* compositis non omissa. *Quint.*

Non sum nescius, quantum susceperim negotii, qui motus corporis exprimere verbis, imitari scriptura conatus sim voces. *Rhet. ad Herenn. l. 3.*

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR T. CADELL AND W. DAVIES, IN THE STRAND;

BY W. BULMER, AND CO. CLEVELAND-Road, ST. JAMES'S;

1806.

Fig. 7: Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia*, title-page.

The most important treatise for practical studies of gesture has been written by the Irish clergyman, Gilbert Austin, who taught rhetoric in Dublin. His book is not only comprehensive and systematically laid out, it differs from the other sources by offering a notation that identifies different gestures, facilitating their teaching and use on stage. Austin studied the positions and movements of the parts of the body, named them and presented them in illustrations (see fig. 8).

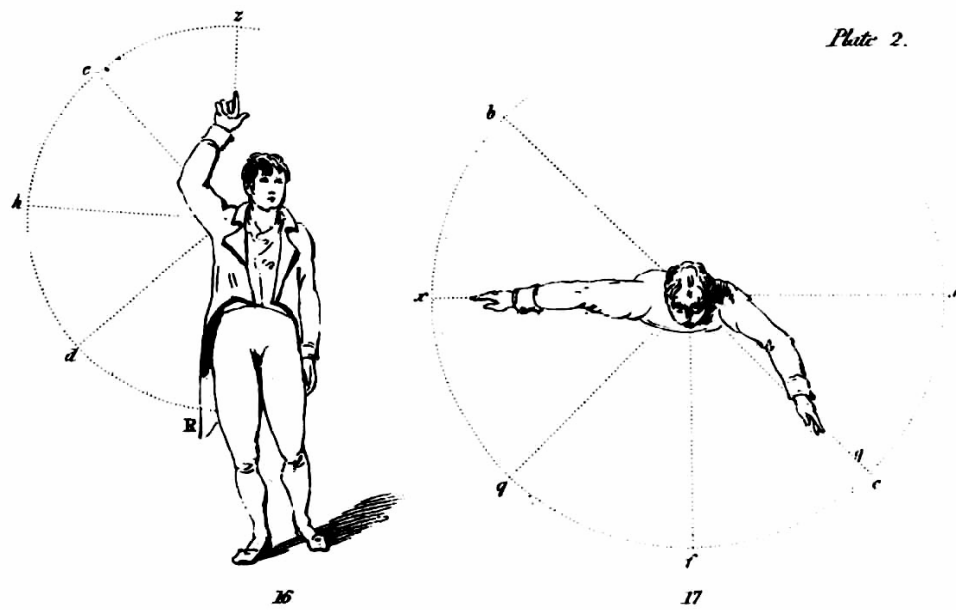


Fig. 8: Austin, *Chironomia*, illustration of the position of hands and arms (from plate 2).

The image on the left side shows the vertical positions (zenith – elevated – horizontal – down – rest), the one on the right side the horizontal positions (back – extended – oblique – forward – across). The combination of both, together with the hand position, describes the overall position. Austin identifies each position with a sequence of three letters: the first letter refers to the hand position, the second to the vertical position of the arm, the third to the horizontal position of the arm (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Jean-Georges Noverre, *Habits de costume pour différents caractères de Danse, tragédie, opéra, comédie et de bal*. Dessinés par M. Boquet. Manuscript, Tome IX, illustration 3, costume of Turnus. Arms and hands of the actor are in the position 'ihq'. University Library Warsaw (with permission).

Austin's letter notation for the position shown in fig. 9 would be 'ihq', meaning 'index / horizontal / oblique'. This is just a simple example, and there are of course many more aspects which can be notated. In fact, the complete notation of the gesture shown in fig. 9 would be '- ihq x': the dash indicates that the gesture is made with the left hand of the actor, the letter 'x' marks the extension of the arm. In Austin's treatise these letters are written alongside the text to be recited; letters above the text indicate positions and movements of the arms and hands,

letters under the text indicate positions and movements of legs and feet. The text examples in Austin all stem from earlier literature, beginning with Cicero and followed by Shakespeare and English eighteenth-century poets such as Edward Young and Thomas Gray. In addition, some of these examples are illustrated, and followed by verbal descriptions of difficult passages.

The new notation, together with the illustrations and verbal commentaries, results in a level of information that might be regarded as more precise than the musical notation of this period.

(e) **Johannes Jelgerhuis**, *Theoretische lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek* (Amsterdam, 1827) (see fig. 10).

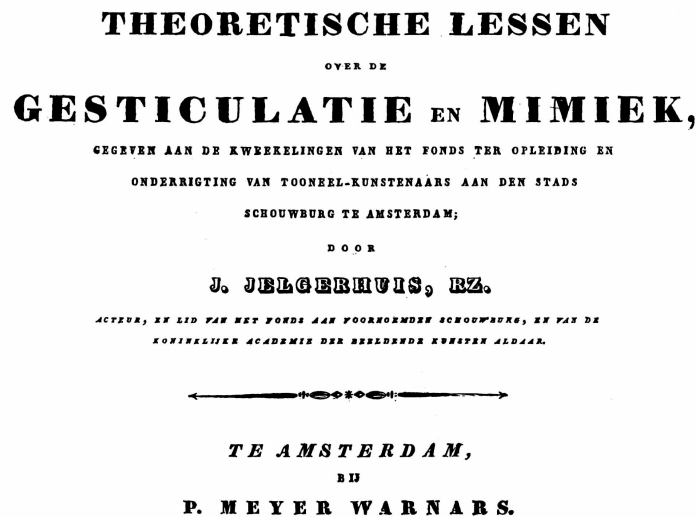


Fig. 10: Jelgerhuis, *Theoretische lessen*, title-page.

Finally, there is the important collection of lectures by the Netherlands professor and actor Johannes Jelgerhuis. He was also a painter – a reason why there are so many illustrations in his book. The work reveals considerable influence from France, where Jelgerhuis studied the theoretical literature on acting and mime. The most important French treatise on mimic art had been *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (Amsterdam, 1702) by Charles Le Brun, the court painter of Louis XIV, who decorated many ceilings in Versailles and in the Louvre. In his treatise, Jelgerhuis used the designs of Le Brun.

Bach

After this introduction we turn to Johann Sebastian Bach. We shall not discuss word-painting, nor the well-known rhetorical figures in Bach's music as such, but shall investigate the congruence between Bach's musical rhetoric and rhetorical gesture.

Formal and expressive gestures

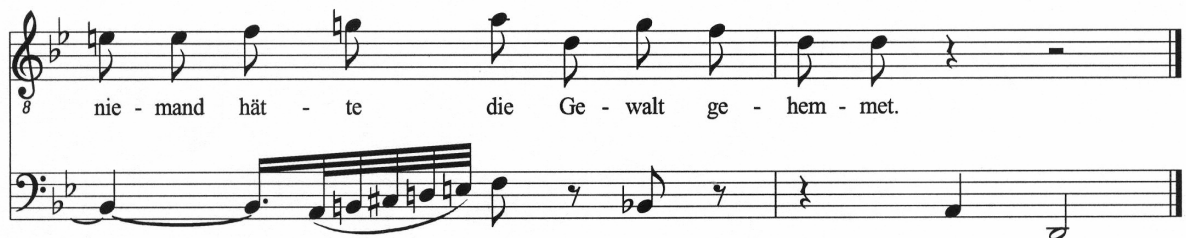
Formal congruences between music and gesture can easily be found. There is, for example, the relationship between the structure of a recitative and its gestural delivery. In a recitative, the music often starts with a chord, followed by a melody that may at first be lacking a specific expression, until some word is subsequently expressed by means of musical rhetoric (see Mus. Ex. 1).



Music Example 1: 'So klage, du zerstörte Gottesstadt' (BWV 46/2)
(Lament then, you city of God that has been destroyed)

The beginning of this recitative is comparable to the relatively neutral beginning of a speech. Its rising motion generally suggests an opening; the expressive content of the word 'klage' (lament) is as yet ignored. 'Du' is set to a single high note, analogous to an indicating gesture. Only on the word 'zerstörte' (destroyed) does a specific sign appear: the tritone between voice and bass ('diabolus in musica'), which is the first example of word-painting in the music and an expressive gesture (dissonance).

At the ends of recitatives, melodies are often heard that move downwards without conveying the specific meaning of a *catabasis*, and rather corresponding to what Austin describes as 'ending gestures' (fall to rest) (see Mus. Ex. 2).



Music Example 2: '... niemand hätte die Gewalt gehemmet' (BWV 14/3)
(And no one could have checked their force)

This musical setting corresponds to the text with a terminating gesture, ignoring 'Gewalt' (which might be reflected in the *tirata* of the bass-line).

A fine example is offered by the *Christmas Oratorio*. The first part of the tenor aria 'Nun mögt ihr stolzen Feinde schrecken' (part vi) repeats the following words: 'Mein Schatz, mein Hort ist hier bei mir!' (see Mus. Ex. 3).

Music Example 3: 'Mein Schatz, mein Hort ist hier bei mir!' (BWV 248, vi/9), b. 30 (My treasure, my shield is here with me!)

Bach sets this first ending with an exclamatory figure, on a high note, expressing – so to speak – the exclamation mark of the text. Contrary to that, the repeat has just a neutral, formulaic ending, 'falling to rest' (see Mus. Ex. 4).

Music Example 4: 'Mein Schatz, mein Hort ist hier bei mir!', b. 46

Such formal structures are not only found at the beginning and at the end of a speech, but also in the middle, according to its composition. Here the punctuation marks are important, and the composers usually respect them. In metrical texts the ends and beginnings of lines are sometimes observed as well. The musical means adopted for such divisions are pauses and cadences. An example comes from BWV 194, no. 2:

Unendlich großer Gott,	(6 syllables; 3 stresses)
ach wende dich zu uns,	(6; 3)
zu dem erwählten Geschlechte,	(9; 4)
und zum Gebete deiner Knechte!	(9; 4)
Ach! Laß vor dich durch ein inbrünstig Singen	(11; 5)
der Lippen Opfer bringen.	(7; 3)
Wir weihen unsre Brust dir offenbar	(10; 5)
zum Dankaltar.	(4; 2)
Du, den kein Haus noch Tempel faßt,	(8; 4)
da du kein Ziel noch Grenzen hast,	(8; 4)
laß dir dies Haus gefällig sein,	(8; 4)
es sei dein Angesicht	(6; 4)
ein wahrer Gnadenstuhl,	(6; 3)
ein Freudenlicht.	(4; 2)

(Infinitely great God,
 ah turn to us,
 your chosen people,
 and to the prayers of your servants.
 Ah grant that before you through our ardent singing
 we may bring the offering of our lips !
 We openly dedicate our hearts to you
 as an altar of thanks.
 You, who are contained by no house, no temple,
 for you have no end or limits,
 may this house be pleasing to you,
 may your face be
 a true throne of grace,
 a light of joy.)

This is a mixture of rhymed and unrhymed lines, the lines changing between 4 and 11 syllables (see Mus. Ex. 5 a-b).

Unend-lich großer Gott, ach, wen-de dich zu uns, zu dem er-wäh-le-ten Ge-

schlechte, und zum Ge-be-te-dei-ner Knechte! Ach, laß vor dich durch ein in-brünstig

Sin-gen der Lippen O - pfer bringen! Wir weihen un-sre Brust dir of-fen bar zum Dankal -

Music Example 5a: 'Unendlich großer Gott' (BWV 194/2), b. 1-9 (Infinitely great God)

tar. Du, den kein Haus, kein Tempel faßt, da du kein Ziel noch Grenzen hast, laß dir dies

Haus ge-fäl - lig sein, es sei dein An- gesicht ein wahrer Gnaden - stuhl, ein Freudenlicht.

Music Example 5b: 'Unendlich großer Gott' (BWV 194/2), b. 10-16

In setting this text Bach uses short rests at the commas, and full cadences similar to *ending phrases* at the full stops. There are, however, also a few rests where no punctuation can be found (marked with arrows in the examples). Some of these rests coincide with the end of a line, but because the lengths of lines are so irregular, the line-ends do not establish a meaningful musical structure. We believe that these rests indicate places for gestures or their preparation. Mattheson writes in his *Vollkommener Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739) that the composer must always bear the positions and gestures of the actors in mind (die 'Stellungen und Geberden der Schauspieler, die der Componist hiebey beständig vor Augen haben muß').⁹

Most composers of that time were taught rhetoric including gesture.¹⁰ This could be the reason why a great many recitatives in Baroque music are full of such rests. Musicians nowadays often neglect these rests because they do not understand their purpose and rather fear that they might disturb the flow of the speech. This is incorrect, however. The following recitative example comes from cantata BWV 54, 'Widerstehe doch der Sünde' (see Mus. Ex. 6):

The image displays a musical score for a recitative from Cantata BWV 54, 'Widerstehe doch der Sünde'. It consists of two systems, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The vocal lines are in C major and 4/4 time. The basso continuo lines are in C major and 4/4 time. The lyrics are written below the vocal lines. In the first system, the lyrics are 'Die Art ver - ruch - ter Sün - den ist zwar von au - ßen wunderschön; al -'. In the second system, the lyrics are 'lein man muß hernach mit Kum - mer und Ver - druß viel Un - ge - mach emp - fin - den. Von'. Arrows point to specific rests in the vocal lines: three in the first system and three in the second system. The basso continuo lines feature figured bass notation: 6, 5, 7 5 in the first system, and 6, 6, 5, 7b in the second system.

Music Example 6: 'Die Art verruchter Sünden' (BWV 54/2) (The nature of loathsome sins)

In the first five bars there are no fewer than six rests without punctuation. Often such rests are to be found with enumerations in the text. A typical feature is a rest before the start of the enumeration, which begins without a comma (see Mus. Ex. 7).

⁹ Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739), p. 84.

¹⁰ Much of the learning seems to have been practical, however, with the help of a teacher rather than from books.

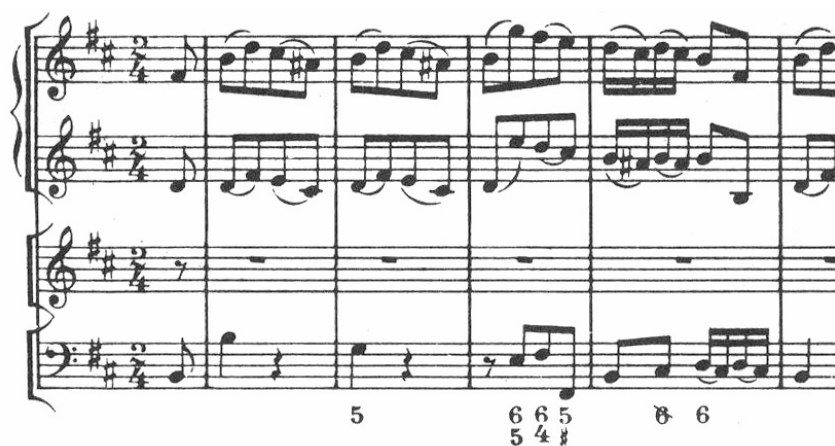


Music Example 7: 'Kommt er dahin mit Fackeln, Lampen, und mit Waffen' (BWV 245) (If he goes thither with torches, lamps and weapons)

In various treatises on gesture it is stated that a gesture happens either directly on the word which shall be stressed, or before this word. Jean Poisson writes 'Le geste doit toujours précéder d'un instant le discours et finir avec lui' (the gesture begins a moment before the word and ends on it).¹¹ In such a case a rest before that word is also required.

Semantic and imitative gestures

Most of Bach's word-paintings may easily be understood if we relate them to the figures of musical rhetoric. In a very few cases, however, it is gesture that helps us further to understand the meaning. One of these rare examples can be found in the above-mentioned aria 'Nun mögt ihr stolzen Feinde schrecken' from the *Christmas Oratorio*. At the beginning of the aria, the meaning of the figure resembling a trill ('Schüttelfigur', b. 4) may not be understood without a knowledge of the text (see Mus. Ex. 8).



Music Example 8: 'Nun mögt ihr stolzen Feinde schrecken' (BWV 248, vi/9), b. 1-5 (Now, you proud enemies may wish to frighten)

¹¹ Jean Poisson, *Reflexions sur l'art de parler en public* [etc.] (n. pl., 1717), p. 31.

When the words are sung, however, the musical figure resembling a trill turns out to belong to the word 'schrecken' (frighten) (see Mus. Ex. 9).



Music Example 9: 'Nun mögt ihr stolzen Feinde schrecken', b. 19

As soon as the text is heard, the figure is shown to relate to a gesture of 'trembling'.

Conclusion

Bach's music is on one hand similar to the music of his contemporaries and on the other hand quite different. It is more complicated and concentrated – as well as less striking at first glance. To see its entire richness it is necessary to use analytical devices in addition to spontaneous experience. Bach was less interested in gestures than most of his contemporaries who were used to writing for the opera. They were used to 'bearing the positions and gestures of the actors in mind', as Mattheson said. In Bach's music the internal meaning is much more important than its external, optical realisation. It is interesting to speculate how Bach's music would have developed if he had gained one of the desired positions as court composer and *maestro di capella*. He would then have had to write operas for singing stars instead of church cantatas for children and amateurs, and nobody can persuade me that this would not have influenced his compositional style. If we remember that Carestini refused to sing Handel's aria 'Verdi prati', because its style was not up-to-date like, for instance, Hasse's, we can imagine that he would have rejected Bach's instrumental and somewhat unmelodic singing style completely. This is also valid for the recitatives. On one hand they are very expressive, and on the other they leave almost no rhythmical initiative to the singer: there are not many places where the singer is able to declaim freely, according to the natural flow of the text. The result is (by the way) that many conductors beat the recitatives in Bach! Bach often uses big intervals and leaps

without rhetorical need. Many of his recitatives proceed in steady quavers and have triadic outlines, moving by leap rather than by step. It is not easy to make even a simple rhetorical gesture in such a style of declamation.

There is one more important difference between the dramatic *recitativo* which allows for or encourages gestures, and the pictorial *recitativo* which paints the gestures. The recitative 'Denk nicht in deiner Drangsalshitze', from cantata BWV 93, exhibits many examples of word-painting, but they establish 'pictures' rather than 'actions' (see Mus. Ex. 10).

The image shows a musical score for a cantata by J.S. Bach. It is for a Tenor and Piano. The score is divided into two systems. The first system begins with a 'Tenore' part and a 'Pianoforte' part. The tempo is marked 'Adagio' and then changes to 'Allegro' indicated by a downward arrow. The lyrics are: 'Denk nicht in deiner Drangsalshitze, wenn Blitz und Donner' and 'Do nev-er fear with-in the bat-tle, when storm and thunder'. The piano part includes a 'Bc.' (Basso Continuo) line. The second system begins with a '3' (triple) marking and a tempo change to 'Andante', then back to 'Adagio' indicated by a downward arrow. The lyrics are: 'kracht und dir ein schwü-les Wet-ter ban-ge macht, daß du von' and 'scare, and ev-ry-thing a-round seems in de-spair that God leaves'. The piano part includes a 'Bc.' line.

Music Example 10: 'Denk nicht in deiner Drangsalshitze' (BWV 93/2)

Some common ground exists between gesture and painting. The writers of painting treatises recommend that the painters should study the motions of actors because they know how to show the affections. And, the treatises for actors advise them to study the great paintings because the painters know how to depict affections. The main difference, however, is the motion – the action – itself.

In the example from BWV 93 (fig. 20) it can be seen that the musical depictions happen *after the word*, contrary to the rule that a gesture should come *before the word*. If in addition to the music we would make gestures, they would simply double (or echo) the words or the music; they would be imitative and not rhetorical. The result of such gestures would be pantomime.

This was prohibited in the theory of gesture. 'Thus you must not put yourself into the Posture of one bending a Bow, presenting a Musquet, or playing

on any Musical Instrument, as if you had it in your Hands.'¹² In the example (fig. 20) the only opportunities for gestures are in bars 2 and 3, and would indicate lightning and thunder. But both these images are already painted in the music: to double the musical depictions with real gestures – whether in the same moment or afterwards – would be virtual pantomime.

The incredible richness of compositional devices in Bach's music, the polyphonic structures, the resourceful and intense use of figures of musical rhetoric, the pictorial fantasy, the inclusion of biblical allegory and numerical symbolism – *all this can achieve its effect without gesture and action.*

In our view Bach is not a dramatist. He is a marvellous creator of arresting pictures – but this is a far cry from being a dramatic composer.

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¹² Charles Gildon, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, The late Eminent Tragedian. Wherein The Action and Utterance of the Stage, Bar, and Pulpit, are distinctly consider'd [etc.]* (London, 1710), cited from Barnett (n. 5 above), p. 214.