

"Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque" by John Butt

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Book Review

John Butt. *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque*. Cambridge Musical Texts and Monographs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xx+237 p. ISBN 0-521-43327-4.

John Butt, who has given us volumes on Bach articulation and the B-Minor Mass,¹ here presents a survey of the practice of music as taught in Lutheran Germany from the mid-16th through the mid-18th century. Proceeding from a thorough examination of Latin and German music textbooks, Butt sets forth the "role of practical music in education" (ch. 2) and the traditions that governed the content of these music books (ch. 3); he discusses the "development of performance practice" (ch. 4), "ornamentation and the relation between performer and composer" (ch. 5), and the "decline of the Lutheran cantorates during the eighteenth century" (ch. 6).

It will be evident from this list of contents that the scope of the book is somewhat more limited than its title might suggest. It concerns chiefly music education as taught to boys,² that is choristers in church schools—not the education of music professionals, such as organists or instrument makers. Its sources are, for the most part, published manuals; only rarely are musical compositions or other sources, such as surviving instruments and performance spaces, discussed.³ Catholic Germany is excluded, and singing in church—especially choral singing—is the chief "art of performance" considered, although there is some material on training in the use of orchestral instruments (pp. 113-20).

¹ John Butt, *Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Bach: Mass in B Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² That females might also be included is suggested only by one tantalizing reference to "a female order near Steinfurt, where young women . . . sang in the services" (p. 53).

³ As Butt readily admits, "This is the survey of a textual tradition" (p. 69, original emphasis).

Within these self-imposed limitations, the book can serve as a handy digest of a large body of hard-to-find material. Still, readers of this journal may regret that little is directly applicable to those burning questions about performance practice for which we still tend to seek unambiguous answers from the sources. Chapter 4 contains bits of information about singing technique, vocal articulation, the direction and composition of choirs, the note on which a trill begins, and the use of falsettists (or lack thereof).⁴ These are found alongside somewhat less useful if occasionally entertaining recommendations for singers concerning diet, "lifestyle," and sexual activity (or, again, lack thereof).⁵ But it is in the nature of this book—and of its sources—that no conclusions are reached concerning the practices to be preferred in particular compositions. If the occasional pearls of practical wisdom seem scattered across long stretches of somewhat abstract quotation, it is because the book's real concerns, and its strengths, lie elsewhere.

Butt has several main themes. First, musical performance in Lutheran Germany as an art—that is, a specialized skill involving the expressive setting forth of sung texts—emerged only in the course of the 17th century as a conscious concern of the writers of manuals, and hence, presumably, of teachers and students. Well into the 18th century, some schools remained content to teach a plain type of vocal production unmodulated by dynamic nuance or added ornamentation, either out of sheer conservatism and lack of imagination or a pietistic distrust of virtuosity. At the same time, other centers saw the whole-hearted adoption of "the 'modern' affective view of music" (p. 42), that is, the rhetorical style issuing above all from Monteverdi's Venice.

Second, the baroque in Germany saw a gradual expansion in the possibilities of musical performance, as witnessed by the increasing elaborateness of both churchly and princely musical establishments and by the tendency toward adopting the possession of specialized musical skills (including the capacity to play instruments and to compose) as prerequisites for such positions as that of cantor. As a result, aspects of performance previously ignored in the treatises—vocal technique and embellishment above all, but also figured bass

⁴ See pp. 69-71 (technique); 81 and 90-92 (articulation); 95, 100-102, and 106-13 (choirs); 84-85 (falsetto); and 135 (trills).

⁵ See pp. 80 and 89-90.

realization and the playing of stringed instruments—eventually find mention even in elementary texts, while becoming central to the great 18th-century treatises.

A third theme is that “ornamentation” was the principal object of music education after the rudiments of notation and vocal production had been mastered. The centrality of this theme to the work may be judged from the fact that eleven of the thirteen musical examples are directly related to it. Through the slow practice of stereotyped ornamental figures, students gained both technical proficiency and an understanding of how music was put together; and by writing out the ornamental figures formerly confined to improvisatory performance, composers created the newer styles employed in the baroque.

It would seem possible to comment further on the relationship of composition to performance, particularly on the crucial point of how the “figures of composition,” that is, the stereotyped motives that were the basis of melodic embellishment (see below), are related to “harmony.” Butt finds that the 18th-century writers on this subject, notably Marpurg, made a conceptual advance over their 17th-century predecessors. Yet he leaves open the question of how the figures of composition are related to the “basic fabric of the music,” commenting only that they “provide the basis for analysis of the music” (p. 145).

One clue accompanies an example from Bernhard’s manuscript *Tractatus*, in which a rudimentary linear-reductive analytic technique is employed. Here Butt suggests that Bernhard was operating via a “subconscious absorption of the fundamental compositional rules” (p. 158). The same idea seems illustrated by Butt’s ex. 7, from Friderici’s *Musica figuralis* (1618), which labels certain embellished forms of a cadence formula as “incorrect” (*unrecht*). It may be that these particular forms are not “idiomatic” (p. 130). However, the forbidden variations would also lead to forbidden parallels, for, by striking both the third and the fifth of the penultimate dominant chord, they cause the embellishment of the underlying discant or soprano cadence (scale-step 7 to 8) to trespass on that of the tenor (2 to 1). By the same token, although Bernhard’s terminological framework remains by and large that of 16th-century linear counterpoint, the reductions show that he understands the musical surface through a sort of rudimentary Schenkerian model; his choice of which notes to retain in the reduction shows him to be

fully conscious of, for example, the chords whose arpeggiation produces much of the surface figuration.

Yet Bernhard's analysis remains extremely superficial (in the technical, analytical sense). Moreover, the failure of any 17th-century writer to make explicit the relationship between "figures" and harmony leads one to suspect that for many of Bernhard's contemporaries music remained a play of figures whose underlying structure was grasped only intuitively.⁶ This points to a fundamental lacuna in the 17th-century literature, one that was made good only by the more "enlightened"—which is to say more analytical and empirical, less pedagogic and nominalistic—writers of the 18th century.

This last consideration raises the question of how the writings quoted relate to larger philosophical and cultural spheres. It may also lead one to wonder whether it would have been possible to adopt not only encyclopedic "practical" writers such as Praetorius and Printz, but also figured bass theorists like Heinichen and Kellner or writers on composition such as Niedt and Scheibe, as principal sources for the study. The latter writers do not seem any more or less concerned with "education" per se than are the former; on the other hand, further consideration of theoretical issues might provide clues toward a deeper interpretation of the "practical" texts. In any case, Butt has provided us with a valuable overview of a relatively neglected set of sources that may now be interpreted within a broader context.

A few matters of detail call for some comment.

The translations—all of which are accompanied by the original—occasionally lack precision due to a tendency to render certain words by their cognates. For example, where Butt translated Marpurg's expression *Setzfiguren* as "set figures," Marpurg's own French provides the more idiomatic "figures of composition" (*figures de composition*).⁷ The term *maniert* becomes "mannered", yielding the unfortunate phrase "mannered singing" (e.g. p. 128), where "stylish" or "ornamented" might better convey the sense of the adjective.

⁶ Butt makes a similar observation about 18th-century musicians: despite admonitions to the contrary, "many improvised . . . without really understanding the rules of harmony" (p. 146).

⁷ See F.W. Marpurg, *Principes du clavecin* (Berlin, 1756), p. 50.

Similarly, Latin *ornare* and its derivatives had the broad sense of "equip" or "furnish," shading into "adorn"—senses probably intended by many of the writers quoted. Thus Doles says that *Manieren* add *Auszierung* to a song (quoted p. 94), which sounds tautological until one understands the first word as referring specifically to melodic ornaments, the second to adornment in general.

On the other hand, *tactus* is equated with "beat" (p. 97) and another time with "bar," in the expression *Tacte noten* (p. 139). The word is notoriously hard to translate; in the first case the reference appears to be to Renaissance-style time-beating, but I wonder whether the second expression might have something in common with the later term *Grundnoten*, used for bass notes that are the basis of variations. Marpurg hints at a similar idea in a difficult sentence that might be translated: "The structural figures of composition, called simply figures of composition, arise through either the contraction or diminution of the parts of the measure (*Tacttheile*); through their use toward a certain affect arise the rhetorical figures of composition."⁸

A few questions might also be raised about the musical examples. Herbst's illustrations of string bowing (ex. 4, p. 116) contain Italian-style divisions, with upbows twice marked on strong beats. Despite the French terminology adopted ("P," presumably for *pousser*), this seems to represent a departure from, not an early example of, a type of bowing "often regarded as the French tradition" (p. 117). In addition, it seems a contradiction, not a parallel, to Speer's "paired fingering," which systematically associates odd-numbered fingers with "good" (consonant, accented) notes (see p. 118). Only the second of two passages by Johann Schelle clearly illustrates "the sort of notated coloratura" that excuses forbidden parallels (p. 156); the parallel

⁸ Butt's translation is problematical: "The *mechanical set figures*, which one simply calls *set figures* and which have in their use a certain affect, originating in the *rhetorical set figures*, are made either in the tying together or in the diminution of the beats" (p. 145). Exactly what Marpurg means by *die Zusammenziehung oder die Verkleinerung der Tacttheile* is unclear, but the sentence is clearly an echo of one from an earlier work that draws a distinction between "structural" (*mechanisch*) figures, that is melodic embellishments, and music-rhetorical figures. See David Schulenberg, "Composition as Variation: Inquiries into the Compositional Procedures of the Bach Circle of Composers," *Current Musicology* 33 (1982), 83n. 17.

fifths in the first passage appear to be, rather, one of several signs of awkwardness in fitting three inner voices to the two outer ones.⁹

Finally, one must note a distressing number of editing oversights, including such grammatical solecisms as failure of agreement between subject and verb (pp. 92 and 138) and apparent reluctance to employ the English subjunctive, even where it is employed in the German original (as on p. 143).

These observations do not, however, significantly reduce the value of a book that will surely become a standard reference on the subject of musical education in early modern Germany.

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⁹ Similar problems occur frequently in the five-part orchestral settings of Lully's melodies.