

## **‘Now swift, now hesitating: The Stylus Phantasticus and the art of fantasy’.**

Musica Antiqua Magazine, 2012, pp 32–36.

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The term *stylus phantasticus* was used by writers on music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a category to describe works which could not be explained within the norms of more clearly defined structures. As an explanation of these artistic phenomena, its early use was concerned with the ‘fantasy’ or imagination of the composer and his composition while later theorists expanded the term to articulate the freedom of creativity and improvisation which they considered to exemplify good performance.

The ‘fantastic’ or ‘fantasy’ style is an important and widely recognised feature of certain types of Baroque music, especially from the seventeenth century. Such pieces, largely instrumental, may be abstract in character (sonatas, preludes, fantasias, toccatas, ricercars, etc.) while some have external programmes or a special descriptive function (for example, battle pieces, imitations of natural sounds and events, and depictions of human behaviour or emotional states). They range from keyboard music by Frescobaldi, Froberger, Buxtehude and Bach to string music by Schmelzer and Biber. While this musical trend lies on a north/south geographical axis between Italy, where it is said to have originated, and the Netherlands, its influence was felt in other countries such as England and France. Beyond the Baroque age, its presence is discernible in Classical and Romantic works, such as the fantasias of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers.

In recent times practitioners of historically informed performance have adopted the expression *stylus phantasticus* to refer to the more bizarre, unpredictable and extreme effects which might be said to mark out “period instrument” performance from mainstream (and by implication) less historically aware, modern instrument interpretation. Extempore fantasy lies at the heart of this present meaning. The accomplished interpreter, Ton Koopman, sums this up rather neatly:

Stylus phantasticus wants to keep the listener awake by special effects, astonishment, irregular voice leadings, dissonances, variations in rhythm and imitation. It is a free, improvisational style which forces the audience to listen full of astonishment while wondering 'how is this possible?' (Koopman 1991, 150)

Just as the term is difficult to define and consequently loosely applied today, so its meaning in the seventeenth century was also fluid.

The Baroque polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) most famously defined the *stylus phantasticus* in his *Musurgia Universalis* (1650), Book VII, 585:

The *stylus phantasticus* is appropriate for instruments. It is the most free and unfettered method of composition, bound to nothing, neither to words, nor to a harmonious subject. It is organised with regard to manifest invention, the hidden reason of harmony, and an ingenious, skilled connection of harmonic phrases and fugues. And it is divided into those pieces which are commonly called *Phantasias*, *Ricercatas*, *Toccatas*, and *Sonatas*. (Translation from Brewer 2010, 25)

Kircher’s *stylus phantasticus* was the third of eight styles of music catalogued according to type of expression and use. The others were *Ecclesiasticus* (sacred), *Canonicus* (to show the skill of the

composer), *Madrigalescus*, *Melsimaticus* (aria), *Hyposchematicus* (dance), *Symphoniacus* (instrumental ensemble) and *Dramaticus* or *Recitativus*. Kircher also gave musical examples of each style. These included Lasso and Palestrina for the ecclesiastic style and Monteverdi for the dramatic. One of his examples for the fantastic style, Froberger's hexachord fantasia, is very revealing. This piece is a strictly polyphonic working out of a single melodic idea: a *tour de force* of compositional virtuosity and imagination.

As the high Baroque compositional style crystallised at the end of the century, definitions broadened from the classification of written compositions to include performance elements which were spontaneous and could not be written down. Later definitions of *stylus phantasticus* by music theorists such as Brossard, Janovka, Mattheson, Walther and Grassineau increasingly concern this free performance style. (Tarling 2004, 67)

In the early eighteenth century the Hamburg diplomat, composer and theorist, Johann Mattheson (1681–1764) developed his own theory of musical style in four publications: *Das neu-eröffnete Orchestre* (1713); *Das beschützte Orchestre* (1717); *Kern Melodischer Wissenschaft* (1737); and *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739). Over these three decades, his concept of *stylum shantasticum* progressed by stages. In *Das beschützte Orchestre* (1717) he mentions it in the context of chamber music but goes on to incorporate improvised vocal embellishments within its scope:

To the CHAMBER STYLE. 1. The Stylus Symphoniacus, one of the noblest in the Chamber, already sufficiently described above, belong the allemandes, etc., for the clavier, lute, viola da gamba, violin, etc., the courantes, sarabandes, gavottes, gagues, etc., in a word, all suites, whether for many instruments or few. If they are for few instruments and consist of soli, they belong to the Stylus Phantasticum, which is here subordinate to the Symphoniacus and in fact belongs into the Chamber, towards which we also count everything that is extemporized, and so the Phantasticus also applies to the organ. The [singer] Paulina has a habit of singing extempore and to phantasize with her voice without any words; which I certainly have heard from him [*sic*] with great pleasure. The above mentioned dances which are counted towards the Symphonic Style are artificial [artistically elaborated] and would not really be used for dancing. They only have the approximate tempo of these [above-mentioned] dances but are much more noble. An Allemande for dancing and one for playing are as different as heaven and earth and so are the others, perhaps with the exception of the Sarabandes [which are only slightly different] *Das beschützte Orchestre* (1717), 137–138. (Translation from Rowen 1949, 10 and Norbert Meyn, e-mail correspondence.)

Writing over twenty years later in his *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), Mattheson develops his definition of 'Fantastischer Styl' away from a method of composition towards a style of vocal and instrumental performance:

It actually consists not so much in the writing or composing with the pen, as in the singing and playing that occurs spontaneously, or as is said, *extempore*. *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), 87–90. (Translation from Harriss, 216)

He also considers the *stylus phantasticus* within the larger category of the theatrical style:

For this style is the most free and unrestrained manner of composing, singing and playing that one can imagine, for one hits first upon this idea and then upon that one, since one is bound neither to words nor to melody, only to harmony, so that the singer or player can display his skill. All kinds of otherwise unusual progressions, hidden ornaments, ingenious

turns and embellishments are brought forth without actual observation of the measure and the key, regardless of what is placed on the page, without a formal theme and ostinato, without theme and subject that are worked out; now swift, now hesitating, now in one voice, now in many voices, now for a while behind the beat, without measure of sound, but not without the intent to please, to overtake and to astonish'. *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), §93, 88. (Translation from Snyder 1987, 253)

That Mattheson borrows directly from Kircher is clear at the start of this last extract. That he later chooses the openings of a toccata by Froberger and a prelude by Buxtehude as models of 'a manner of composing with this name [i.e. 'fantastisch'] which is well liked' (Snyder 1987, 250) points more clearly to the progression of his views. The North German tradition of organ playing led by Tunder, Weckmann, Reincken, Buxtehude, Bruhns, Lubeck, Böhm and Leyding had rejuvenated the Italian toccata style of Merulo, Fresobaldi, Rossi and Froberger. Their compositions present a new concept of fantasy which combines the arts of both composition and performance. (Collins 2005)

Kerala Snyder (2011) is selective about which part of a multi-sectional prelude and fugue might best be described as belonging to the *stylus fantasticus*. She proposes that Mattheson's 1739 definition is less applicable to Buxtehude's free organ works 'as complete compositions' but 'contains important information concerning the style and performance of their free sections'. She also finds that behind their 'appearance of freedom, careful planning can be detected'. Buxtehude's organ music may be at the forefront of the new philosophies but these works also represent 'fantasy' in its older, seventeenth-century sense, and are more in resonance with Kircher's use of the term.

The link between oratory and musical performance also plays its part in the development of the *stylus fantasticus* in the works of Buxtehude and numerous others, including those of his favourite student, Nicolaus Bruhns (1665-97). The ancient rhetorical theories of Cicero, Boethius and Aristotle were 'rediscovered' and reinterpreted by Renaissance humanists and theologians (Luther, for example) and this in turn led to the concept of *Musica Poetica* and the influential Doctrine of Affections being widely cultivated by Baroque music theorists. About the performance of Buxtehude's organ music, Koopman states:

The organist should feel him/herself as an actor, who is controlling the whole theatre with the audience hanging on to his/her every word. The *stylus phantasticus* is a magic style that wants to surprise. It should bring the audience into a feeling of utter astonishment ...  
(Koopman 1991, 150)

Nicolaus Bruhns was not only a virtuoso organist but also an excellent violinist. Mattheson tells us that Bruhns could accompany himself with the organ pedals whilst playing the violin. His exceptionally fine Praeludium in E minor permits us to round the circle between keyboard and non-keyboard instrumental music. John Butt has pointed out the thematic coincidences between this exceptional 'organ' piece and the German solo violin school in general and Johann Paul von Westhoff in particular. Bruhn's Praeludium, whether viewed as an original organ piece or not, is therefore a useful vehicle with which to compare the stylus phantasticus of the North German organists to the instrumental music in late seventeenth-century Central and East-Central Europe, notably Schmelzer, Biber and Georg Muffat. (Butt 1995, 207–209)

The loose, multi-sectional form of the Praeludium in E minor is a feature common to most North German non-chorale based organ music. This probably reflects the contemporary desire to ally musical expression to the structure and skills of public speaking or oratory (*Musica Poetica*). The principles of rhetoric were widely understood at the time and were a standard part of the education

of German organists. The Hamburg cantor Christoph Bernhard, for example, categorised the way musical figures should be used in a composition according to the use and affect required (*Tractatus compositionis augmentatus*, c.1657) and Buxtehude and his pupils would have been familiar with this system.

By applying the main oratorical headings to the musical structure of Bruhns' Praeludium in E minor we can propose different patterns of correspondence. One possible interpretation is shown below.

Cicero	Mattheson	Bruhns	
		bars	comment
Exordium	Exordium	1–12	introduction and 'call to attention'
Narratio	Narratio	11–20	statement of facts
Propositio	Propositio	21–80	proposal of the main thesis of the oration – fugue 1
Confutatio	Confutatio	80–132	rebuttal of conflicting or mistaken views
Confirmatio	Confirmatio	132–154	affirmation of the main thesis – fugue 2
Conclusio	Peroration	155–161	appealing to the emotions of the audience

Such schemes have proved a useful tool to demonstrate and explain the structural contrasts of multi sectional forms. Not only does this approach introduce a new layer of interpretation to inspire the performer, it also reveals the architectural control which the North German keyboard players sought to exercise over their wild and 'fantastical' musical ideas.

While this development of the *stylus phantasticus* in Northern Germany was largely driven by organists, it is important to note that not all this music was written exclusively with the church organ loft in mind. It has been suggested that much of the North German pedaliter repertoire (including works by J. S. Bach himself) were created away from the church organ on a pedal harpsichord or clavichord in smaller rooms and at home. The difference in attack and immediacy of sound of these instruments may have proved an even more suitable medium for the exploration of the *stylus phantasticus* than the organ. Domestic pedal instruments may have even suggested or created certain effects not then achievable on the church organ, for example, textures and techniques inspired by string chamber music. Thus while pieces like Bruhns' praeludium could be adapted to be played on the organ (assuming certain adjustments to temperament through transposition, and performance criteria, such as choice of tempi in a larger or smaller acoustical spaces), they make greater sense as experiments designed for more intimate, domestic audition. (Miklavčič 2011)

In addition to the features associated with rhetoric, we occasionally find programmatic elements in North German keyboard music. External references and programmes are particularly important to the instrumental string repertory of the Viennese and Salzburg courts. Rare examples in works such as Johann Kuhnau's six programme sonatas, *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger biblischer Historien* (1700) and Bach's 'Capriccio on the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother', BWV 992 can provide a narrative model with which to understand many of the multi-movement forms of German keyboard music. (Butt 1995, 216–217)

The prolific Austrian composer Johann Heinrich Schmelzer (1620/23–1680) and the Bohemian composer and violinist Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644–1704) worked under court and ecclesiastical patronage which encouraged a highly sophisticated appreciation of instrumental chamber music and musical 'entertainment'. Examples of *stylus phantasticus* elements in their works include the funeral symbolism and bell effects in Schmelzer's *Lamentation on the death of Ferdinand III* for strings, and numerous instances of scordatura tunings in Biber's solo violin music or his depictions of birdsong in the *Sonata representativa* (1669).

Johann Sebastian Bach continued to write in a similar, highly expressive style which commentators such as Mattheson might also describe as ‘fantastisch’—a word which was translated as ‘strange’ and ‘freakish’ as well as ‘fantastic or fantastical’ (German/English Dictionary, Leipzig, 1716, see Snyder 1987, 251). The astounding use of modulation and extreme ‘affective’ contrasts in the organ Fantasia in G minor, BWV 542 (one of Bach’s more radical outpourings) may well have met with negative remarks from some of his contemporaries. The tragic drama of the Chromatic Fantasia in D minor BWV 903, on the other hand, has prompted the very plausible suggestion that it was Bach’s musical response to the sudden death of his first wife, Maria Barbara, during her husband’s long absence in 1720. Such inspired and darkly programmatic works quickly achieved a special status among Bach’s keyboard music and are among the very few of his works to attain a more or less continuous performance tradition up to the present day. (Schleuning 1992, 222)

The Baroque tradition of keyboard fantasy had a direct influence on later composers. Through his sons and pupils, Bach’s fantasies were known and admired by later pianists, Mozart and Beethoven for example, and through them, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a revival of the ‘imaginative’ and ‘improvisational’ values of Kircher and Mattheson. In this sense, works such as Liszt’s organ Prelude and Fugue on B–A–C–H and Busoni’s *Fantasia contrapuntistica* (1910), a reworking of Bach’s *Art of Fugue* for piano (and later arranged for two pianos), are inheritors of the same tradition.

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