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"Meter in Music, 1600-1800" By George Houle

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George Houle. *Meter in Music, 1600-1800.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. ix, 174p.

Performance practice has its "etic" and its "emic" aspects.[1] The etic aspects tell us how a practice was executed, the emic aspects how it was perceived and understood. Much literature on performance practice concentrates on the former; this is like learning no more about a foreign language than how to pronounce it correctly — it will not turn one into a very persuasive speaker. One of the merits of Houle's book is that the performer is introduced to both the etic and the emic aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century meter. As he states in his introduction, "with an understanding of 17th-century perceptions of meter we will be better able to perform this music with the verve, passion, and authority it deserves," that is, become, if not a native speaker, at least a speaker who — in spite of the unavoidable twentieth-century accent — can utter something meaningful.

Thus, Houle does not provide a handy set of simple rules for performing from early metric notations. Instead, he leads us through a vast body of pedagogical and speculative writings on meter, rhythm, accentuation, and tempo, from Ornithoparcus (1517) and Heyden (1540) to Clementi (1801) and Monsigny (1803) — probably the most comprehensive survey of the literature on these topics yet published. Sometimes the journey is arduous. After reading the fiftieth opinion on the relationship between ¢ and C, one is likely to become bewildered and unsure whether it is more or less equivalent to the previously cited opinion, contradicts it, or is merely vague and unfathomable. It would have helped here, in fact, throughout this book, if the author had provided examples from the repertory to which he believes the observation to be applicable and discussed the implications for their performance. This crucial connection between theory and practice is generally lacking; the occasional musical examples drawn from the treatises themselves tend to

1. On "etic" and "emic" see Harold S. Powers, "Tonal Types and Modal Categories in Renaissance Polyphony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34 (1981): 439; the terms derive from the linguistic concepts "phonetic" and "phonemic."

be too artificial and over-simplified to be very enlightening.[2] One is also disappointed that the author, with his encyclopedic knowledge of the subject, provides no guidance for (or even discussion of) such common practical questions as: when do mensural or proportional signs still prescribe exact tempo relationships, and when do they no longer imply such relationships.[3]

From his sources, Houle derives a useful chronological framework for the evolving conception of meter. During the earlier seventeenth century he sees metric organization still governed by the *tactus*, communicated to the performer by mensural symbols and note values. Gradually this organization was replaced by what Houle calls "quantitative articulation": a hierarchy of strong and weak, or "good" and "bad" beats, corresponding to their *quantitas intrinsica* or "inner duration." The term "quantitative articulation" is somewhat misleading, since the "inner" duration does not depend on actual duration, but merely on metric position. This *quantitas intrinsica*, a rather paradoxical concept adapted from poetical theory (see below), was projected by means of articulation, *notes inégales*, fingerings, bowings, tonguings, etc. Eventually quantitative articulation was replaced by accentual articulation, but Houle believes this did not generally happen until the later eighteenth century, since he finds few references to dynamic accents in earlier writings.

Houle's formulation could be improved by taking account of the distinction between meter and accentuation, or rather, between meter and rhythm. Meter can be defined as the background articulation of time in equal intervals, rhythm as the foreground articulation by groups oriented with respect to accents.[4] Much of the excitement of measured music derives from tension between foreground rhythms and background meter; for this to be effective, the music (and the performer) must successfully project both meter and rhythm. In sixteenth-century polyphony, meter usually is projected by dissonance treatment (rather than by the inaudible beating of a tactus), while quantitative accents are

2. This even applies to the most concrete examples provided: a set of pieces for mechanical organ from Engramelle's *La tonotechnie* (1775) supplied on a cassette accompanying the book, as realized by a computer according to Engramelle's detailed instructions for articulation and *notes inégales*. Houle states, in fact, that because of the mechanical nature of Engramelle's instrument, the articulations are probably exaggerated and "should be studied rather than imitated" (p. 122).

3. Étienne Darbellay has argued that even within the same compositions the signs may or may not prescribe such relationships, depending on the context: see his "Tempo relationships in Frescobaldi's *Primo Libro di Capricci*," in *Frescobaldi Studies*, Alexander Silbiger, ed. (Durham, 1987), 302-26.

4. These definitions are taken from Leo Treitler, "Regarding Meter and Rhythm in the *Ars Antiqua*," *Musical Quarterly* 65 (1979): 524.

among the chief means for projecting rhythmic groupings. The system broke down during the seventeenth century with the introduction of freer forms of dissonance treatment, and additional means had to be employed to project the background meter. These means included the devices described by Houle as examples of *quantitas intrinsica* as well as harmonic movement. Quantitative and tonic accents could serve to project foreground rhythms, even when their stresses did not coincide with metrical strong beats, but I find it difficult to accept that dynamic accents never played a role here, particularly in vocal music. After all, languages like Italian and German are heavily accentual, and it is hard to believe that even in the early seventeenth century, with its great concern over textual declamation, singers would avoid dynamic accents.[5] Nevertheless, it is probably true that by the late eighteenth century there was more and more reliance on dynamic accent for the projection of both meter and rhythm, and that the subtle techniques of *quantitas intrinsica* fell largely out of use.[6]

An interesting example of Houle's exploration of emic aspects of performance practice is his discussion of *rhythmopoeia*: the description of rhythmic groupings by their equivalent poetic feet, and the attribution of affects to these "musical feet." He has some difficulties with this doctrine, seeing it as inconsistent and at times irreconcilable with the common conceptions of meter of the period, and he concludes that it was a "curious and irrational topic" (p. 77). The problem is that the musical feet, or *rhythmi*, as Mattheson calls them, are rhythmic groupings oriented purely towards quantitative accents, with disregard of metric stresses. But there really is no inconsistency between Mattheson's statement that each measure has only two parts (a downbeat and an upbeat) but that a metric foot can contain several long and several short "syllables" (p. 69), since a long syllable does not necessarily correspond to a downbeat. Houle praises Wolfgang Caspar Printz ("more forward-looking than Mattheson," p. 69) for having resolved the supposed contradiction with the concept of "intrinsic accent" for a short syllable on a strong beat, but one could argue that this concept introduces a further confusion between the (background) metric hierarchy of strong and weak beats and the (foreground) rhythmic patterns of accentuation.

5. Indeed, Treitler believes it served for the projection of rhythm already in the *ars antiqua*, although its role receded into the background during subsequent centuries; see "Meter and Rhythm," 525.

6. It is probably also true that earlier "traditional" performances of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, by not employing these devices for clarifying the metric background, tended to overemphasize the projection of rhythm at the expense of meter, while the recent "authentic" performances, by often giving them undue stress, tend to overemphasize the projection of meter at the expense of rhythm.

This is a valuable source-book for anyone desiring a deeper understanding of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conceptions of meter. If in a future revision, however, the author is mindful of the meter-rhythm distinction, and if he provides examples of applications to repertory of the period, as suggested earlier, the value of his book will be immeasurably enhanced.

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