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Communications

George Houle

Alexander Silbiger

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Professor George Houle, Stanford University, conveys the following:

I would like to respond to Alexander Silbiger's review of *Meter in Music, 1600-1800* in this journal, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989). Unfortunately, Mr. Silbiger has misperceived the fundamental purpose of the book, which is to report the perception and performance of meter as conceived by musicians of the time, rather than by looking at this material through the framework of concepts that developed in later centuries. Mr. Silbiger writes that "Houle's formulation could be improved by taking account of the distinction between meter and accentuation, or rather, between meter and rhythm." Specifically, he proposes applying Leo Treitler's definitions of meter ("the background articulation of time in equal intervals") and rhythm ("the foreground articulation by groups oriented with respect to accents").¹

It is precisely because of the realization that this topic cannot be pressed into this ready mold that I have assembled this information and attempted to show how subtly the perception of meter is distinguished from its articulation by a large number of writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Accent is considered to be only one of many and various means of articulation. Thus there is a crucial distinction between the perception of meter and the various means used to articulate and heighten this perception. Accents did not become identified with metrical perception until the late eighteenth century.

Leo Treitler's definition of rhythm is very close to many found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theory books, but it is a concept not found in those of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. His definitions of meter and rhythm in thirteenth-century music are logical only if word accent is equated with musical accent. His ideas have been challenged² and considerably enlarged³ as they describe accent, meter,

1. "Regarding Meter and Rhythm in the *Ars Antiqua*," *Musical Quarterly* 56 (1979), 542.

2. By Ernest H. Sanders in *JAMS* 33 (1980), 602.

and rhythm in the thirteenth century. They are irrelevant to the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when word accent is represented in music by numerous and varied equivalents, such as length and duration of notes, coincidence with harmonic consonance, a rise or fall in melodic pitch, changes in timbre, as well as with accent or stress.

The writings I came to know during my investigations seemed at first almost perverse in their difficult descriptions of metrical perception. They could always be greatly simplified and "improved" if the word "accent" were to be substituted for *quantitas intrinseca*, for example, and in fact, most modern English translations of these theorists do just that. But it is necessary to be wary of easy simplifications and to pay close attention to the precise words actually used.

Mr. Silbiger comments that musicians need more guidance interpreting the tempo relationships of seventeenth century notation than is provided in the first chapter of *Meter in Music*. He is right about this. There are some clear relationships between meter and tempo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which are discussed in *Meter in Music*, but a great deal more needs to be done in order to understand the use of tempo-words, note values, the normative tempos of various genres of composition, and particular practices of individual composers. I hope that the topic of tempo in the seventeenth century will someday be given the full-scale study it deserves.

I agree with Mr. Silbiger that more examples of the practical application of theoretical concepts of meter would be helpful to performers today. It is a project that I would like to undertake in the near future.

Professor Alexander Silbiger, Duke University, responds as follows:

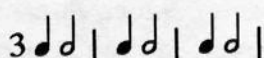
I am baffled by Professor Houle's statement that I have misperceived the fundamental purpose of his book, "to report the perception and performance of meter as conceived by musicians of the time," since it is precisely for doing this that I praised him in my first paragraph. I did suggest that certain aspects of his presentation could be made clearer by reference to the meter-rhythm distinction, which might also shed light on

3. By Margot E. Fassler, "Accent, Meter, and Rhythm in Medieval Treatises *De rithmis*," *Journal of Musicology* 5 (1987), 164.

some supposed inconsistencies in writings on the topic by Mattheson and others. Houle dismisses this suggestion, evidently on the basis that the concept of this distinction does not appear explicitly in the literature of the period. This raises a methodological (and perhaps also ideological) issue which I don't want to get into here, except to say it probably is illusory to think we can rid ourselves of the concepts that shaped our thinking on a subject. On the contrary, the concepts of another age are usually best understood with reference to our own concepts. Let me give a concrete example by considering the type of basic question that one would like a book like Houle's to address: Would a 17th-/18th-century musician have distinguished, in perception or in performance, between the two patterns:



and



(e.g., see Mattheson's *Zwesylbige Füsse*, nos. 3 and 4, represented in Houle's book on p. 135)? If a distinction was made, whether by dynamic accent or merely by bowing, tonguing, fingering, or other subtle Baroque device, the distinction between Mattheson's two *rhythmi* is not one of meter (not even for an 18th-century musician), but one of rhythm. If in performance no distinction was made between the two patterns, then we are dealing with identical rhythms shifted against a common metric background. In short, I propose that the meter-rhythm distinction is indispensable for a fruitful discussion of 17th-/18th-century practices and perceptions.