

1991

Michel Blavet's Breathing Marks: A Rare Source for Musical Phrasing in Eighteenth-Century France

Lewis Emanuel Peterman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peterman, Lewis Emanuel (1991) "Michel Blavet's Breathing Marks: A Rare Source for Musical Phrasing in Eighteenth-Century France," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 4. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199104.02.04

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol4/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Baroque Phrasing

Michel Blavet's Breathing Marks: a Rare Source for Musical Phrasing in Eighteenth-Century France

Lewis E. Peterman, Jr.

Musical ideas that belong together must not be separated; on the other hand, you must separate those ideas in which one musical thought ends and a new idea begins, even if there is no rest or caesura.¹

Michel Blavet (1700-1768), a composer and virtuoso flautist, was particularly interested in clarifying musical phrasing, and, as a result of his pedagogic efforts in several publications of his flute music, it is possible for modern scholars to extrapolate an outline of the basic principles for musical phrasing in France during the mid-eighteenth century. Highly acclaimed by Telemann, Marpurg, Quantz, Le Blanc, Daquin, and Voltaire, Blavet was, for a quarter of a century, considered by many as the premier flautist in all of Europe. In 1738 he served as principal flautist in the *Musique du roi*, in 1740 as first flute at the *Opéra*, and from 1726 until 1768 performed at the prestigious *Concert spirituel* more often than any other European musician. In fact, Blavet was so

1. Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute* (Berlin, 1752), trans. Edward R. Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 122.

associate with the Prussian court — an invitation that was, however, declined.

Blavet has left us a small corpus of his own compositions: four stage works, five publications of instrumental music, and three collections of instrumental arrangements. Several of his publications — three collections of instrumental arrangements (*Recueils de pièces*) and his six sonatas for flute (Op. 2) — contain hundreds of carefully notated breathing marks, designating precisely where musical phrases occur. In his *Avertissement* for Op. 2, Blavet discloses his rationale for including these notated breathing marks — an altogether unusual procedure for his time.

J'ay toujours remarqué dans les Ecoliers, de la difficulté à reprendre la respiration à propos; en sorte qu'ils confondent, le plus souvent, une frase avec l'autre, ou ils interrompent un chant, qui doit estre passé tout d'une haleine. Pour éviter cette confusion, j'ay imaginé de mettre la lettre h, dans les endroits, où l'on doit respirer, sur tout dans les morceaux de chant, comme Rondeaux, ou autres petites pieces de caractère, dont toute la grace depend de l'arengement des frases, de la netteté, et de la précision, que l'on ne peut trouver sans respirer à son aise, et dans les vris repos.²

In his publications of flute sonatas and arrangements for two unaccompanied flutes, Blavet's use of breathing marks is exceptionally consistent, often even predictable. In an effort to clarify compositional form,³ he uses phrase marks as musical punctuation, delineating the individual musical phrases: their beginnings and endings. For example, in Appendix A, a modern performing edition of the first page of the third movement (*L'Henriette Aria I*) of Blavet's first flute sonata of Op. 2,⁴ it is clear that in measure four (labelled above the flute part as A2) a phrase mark separates the second note, A, from the third note, B, reminding the

2. "I have always noticed in pupils a difficulty in taking breath at the correct place, which makes them often confuse one phrase with the next, or interrupt a melody which should be expressed in one breath. In order to avoid this confusion, I have decided to put the letter "h" [*halein*, i.e., breath] in the places where one should breathe, especially in pieces such as *Rondeaux* and other little character pieces where gracefulness depends on the arrangement of the phrases, clarity, and precision which comes with breathing easily and in the correct place."

3. Compositional form is viewed here as the result of perceived relationships among the structural patterns that are generated by melody, rhythm, harmony, texture, ornamentation, and dynamics.

4. Michel Blavet, *Sechs Sonaten für Querflöte und Basso continuo* (Op. 2). Edited by Willy Hess. Winterthur/Schweiz: Amadeus Verlag, 1983, permission requested. In this recent performing edition, Blavet's breathing marks (h) have been modernized, i.e., changed to superscripted commas (').

flautist that the melodic material first stated at the beginning of the movement is simply repeated at this point and should not be phrased using A as the anacrusis to B: that is, the musical phrase A2 properly begins on the third note of the measure (pitch B), not on the second (pitch A). At measure 11, the phrase mark, between the low D and the following B, is used for the same purpose: it separates the first statement of B (labelled at the double bar as B1) from its repeated statement, B2, which begins in measure 11. Similarly, the following two phrase marks, in measure 13 (labelled B3) and in measure 15 (B4), signal transpositions of this second phrase, B. And finally, at measures 18 and 19, the phrase marks are necessary to communicate to the performer that two sequential phrases (C1 and C2) begin precisely on the third eighth-note of their respective measures, not on the fourth.

Thus, in this symmetrical dance-like Aria all the phrases are strictly regulated by the meter: they all begin on a strong beat, either the first or the fourth eighth note of the six-eight measure, and they are all multiples of two beats in length (i.e., two, four, six, eight, or ten-beat phrases). But, one may ask, what about compositions where the relationship between the meter and the sequence of individual phrases is more complex, such as abstract movements from sonatas that are not based upon danced rhythms, where phrases of different lengths are more independent of the meter, beginning and ending at any point in the measure?

Appendix B presents just such a piece, the *Prélude* from Blavet's Suite in D major for two unaccompanied flutes. In this short *Prélude* in duple meter, there are phrases of several different lengths: some are only three and three-quarter beats long; some are four, five, seven, or even seven and a quarter beats long; and yet longer ones are eight or nine beats in length. Aside from the frequently recurring melodic phrases in both flute parts, labelled A, all the phrases in the top flute part are freely spun out without notated rests to indicate the beginnings and endings of the individual phrases. In fact, had Blavet not inserted phrase marks, it is unlikely that modern performers — or eighteenth-century performers, for that matter — would agree on the same places to phrase, since the number of possibilities for potential phrases is nearly infinite. Our problem, then, is to identify the unspoken, i.e., taken-for-granted rules that guided Blavet's choices for musical phrasing — aesthetic judgments that were made and preserved in notated form some 250 years ago. On what basis were these choices made? What were the musical cues for his choices? And how can Blavet's 250-year-old choices guide us, today,

when we endeavor to phrase eighteenth-century French music as it was phrased in the eighteenth century?

Analysis, of course, furnishes us with a tool; it provides a way to make explicit the implied rules of musical phrasing that were a natural part of Blavet's musical sensibilities. To that end, I have analyzed over 1,000 notated breathing marks by Blavet—breathing marks found in 99 different compositions, consisting of simple airs, dances, character pieces, and movements from solo sonatas. As a result, I have isolated fifteen different musical contexts that determine Blavet's choices for musical phrasing—contexts that are governed by melody, rhythm, harmony, texture, ornamentation, and dynamics. I propose that these fifteen musical contexts represent the unspoken, taken-for-granted rules that, either consciously or unconsciously, guided Blavet's choices.

Melody

1. Before wide melodic leaps

Rhythm

2. Before and after dance patterns
3. After long notes in the context of shorter note values
4. After the first note of a measure in quick passagework
5. Before changes of rhythmic patterns
6. Before notes that function as an anacrusis
7. At notated rests (*but not always*)
8. Between the first and second "large" beats of a hemiola

Harmony

9. After harmonic cadences
10. When two notes of the same pitch occur at cadential points

Texture

11. During parallel movement
12. At points of imitation
13. In polyphonic textures of independent phrases

Ornamentation

14. After certain *agréments*

Dynamics

15. Before a sudden change in dynamics

The first musical context is determined by melodic contour, and, accordingly, Blavet often placed a breathing mark before a relatively wide melodic leap. In Example 1, for instance, a breathing mark is located in the second measure, between the ornamented half note E and the following dotted-quarter note A. Significantly, the ascending fourth is the widest melodic interval in the passage. Most of the breathing marks in Appendix B are, in fact, located at points in the melody where a relatively wide leap occurs.

Example 1. Blavet, "Prélude de Mr. Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 1-2.



The next seven musical contexts (i.e., Examples 2 through 8) are all determined by the rhythmic flow, rather than the melodic contour. Thus, in Example 2, Blavet placed a breathing mark at the end of the fourth measure, subdividing the repeated eight-measure melody into two four-measure phrases. In fact, he consistently used breathing marks in this manner, to set off common baroque dance rhythms; and, since the baroque minuet was normally a twelve-beat pattern of two dependent phrases (each of six beats), Blavet's breathing mark is placed after the first phrase of twelve beats.

Example 2. Blavet, "Menuet très petit," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 1-8.



Example 3 demonstrates another typical placement for Blavet's breathing marks, also based upon rhythmic flow: i.e., after long notes in

the context of shorter note values. (Notice that this rule generally coincides with modern practice.)

Example 3. Blavet, "Prélude de Mr Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 5-6.



Example 4 shows how his breathing marks are distributed in quick passagework, generally after the first note of a measure. (Again, this is similar to modern practice.)

Example 4. Blavet, "L'Henriette Aria I," from Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 32-34.



Also, before rhythmic patterns change, Blavet often inserted a phrase mark. In Example 5, for instance, an abrupt shift from duple to triple subdivisions of the beat occurs and is announced by a breathing mark.

Example 5. Blavet, "Rondeau de Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 71-73.



Example 6 demonstrates how Blavet often inserted a breathing mark before notes that function as an anacrusis, while Example 7 shows that Blavet suggested phrasing on some rests, but not necessarily on all.

Example 6. Blavet, "Prélude de Mr. Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 16-17.



Example 7. Blavet, "L'amour est à craindre," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 42-45.



The last rhythm-determined context for breathing marks is shown in Example 8, where Blavet has indicated breathing marks (in both flute parts) between the second and third beats of the second measure. With compositions in triple meter, Blavet consistently placed breathing marks at this point: i.e., between the first and second "large" beats of a hemiola, in other words between the second and third beats of a six-beat pattern in three-four time.

Example 8. Blavet, "Champagne adorable," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 14-17.



The next two musical contexts (Examples 9 and 10) are determined not by melody or rhythm, as are the first 8, but by the harmony.⁵ In Example 9, for instance, Blavet placed a breathing mark directly after a strong harmonic cadence in D major, and in Example 10 one occurs after the repeated pitch D in the second measure, since at this cadential point the harmonic underpinning does not change.

Example 9. Blavet, "L'Henriette Aria I," from Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 21-22.



Example 10. Blavet, "Rondeau de Zaïde," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 1-4.



5. In the forward to Book Three of his *Pièces de Clavecin* (1722), François Couperin also expresses concern for the relationship between phrasing and harmony. The following translation of Couperin's comments is provided by Leigh Gerdine, in her translation of Hermann Keller's *Phrasing and Articulation*.

You will encounter a new sign, which looks like this: ' ; it is to mark the end of melodies or of what we call harmonic phrases, and to make it clear that it is necessary to detach slightly the end of a melody before passing on to what follows. The separation is almost imperceptible in general, although in not finding this little silence, persons of taste would know that there was something lacking in the performance; in a word, it is the difference between those who read on and on [without punctuating orally] and those who stop at the periods and commas. These silences should be made to be felt without altering the rhythm.

Texture, too, may provide the musical context for Blavet's breathing marks, and Example 11 clarifies how he preferred two melodies in parallel motion to be phrased precisely together.

Example 11. Blavet, "Prelude de Mr. Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 19-21.



In independent counterpoint, however, Blavet was careful to render all points of imitation with consistent phrasings. Thus in Example 12 the second measure of the second flute is phrased in order to clarify that it is merely a transposed imitation of the first measure of the first flute.

Example 12. Blavet, "Champagne adorable," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 3-4.



Similarly, Example 13 demonstrates Blavet's preference for independent phrasing of contrapuntal melodies in a predominantly polyphonic context. Thus, in a strict contrapuntal texture, Blavet wisely maintained a nonsimultaneity of phrasing in order to reinforce the independence of melodies in counterpoint.

Example 13. Blavet, "Champagne adorable," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 3-6.



Ornamentation (*agréments*) and dynamics may also determine the context for phrasing, and, accordingly, Blavet often placed a breathing mark directly after a cadential trill or a descending *coulé*, as in Example 14. And finally, he also often used a breathing mark to set off a sudden change in dynamics, as in Example 15.

Example 14. Blavet, "Prelude de Mr. Blavet," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 3-5.



Example 15. Blavet, "Chasse des fêtes greques," from *Première recueil de pièces*, mm. 12-17.



In conclusion, there are 15 musical contexts that determine phrasing in Blavet's music: melodic leaps, dance patterns, temporal values, bar lines, changing rhythmic patterns, anacruses, rests, hemiolas, cadences, repeated pitches, parallelism, imitative counterpoint, polyphonic independence, ornamentation, and changing dynamics. They are the signposts which enable us today to extrapolate the ways of thinking of a musician from the past — a way to help us to know what he thought about composed music, that is, how he interpreted it. Blavet's signposts, along with those of his contemporaries, are the historical markers of late baroque attitudes about artistic understanding. They are the unspoken rules for meaningful interpretation. They are clues to guide us, when

performing eighteenth-century French music, as we attempt to keep musical ideas together and, as Quantz recommends, "separate those ideas in which one musical thought ends and a new idea begins."

Appendix A

A1
L'Henriette Aria I

A2

B1

B2

B3

The image displays a musical score for a piece by Michel Blavet, specifically focusing on breathing marks. The score is written for a single melodic line, likely for a flute or similar woodwind instrument, and is divided into two systems, each containing three staves.

System 1 (Measures 14-17):

- Measure 14:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a half note A4, and a quarter note B4. A breathing mark (a small circle with a cross) is placed above the B4. The staff continues with a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note G4.
- Measure 15:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note F#4.
- Measure 16:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note E4.
- Measure 17:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note D4.

System 2 (Measures 18-21):

- Measure 18:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody begins with a quarter note C4, followed by a half note D4, and a quarter note E4. A breathing mark (a small circle with a cross) is placed above the E4. The staff continues with a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note C4.
- Measure 19:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note B3.
- Measure 20:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note A3.
- Measure 21:** Continues the melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a quarter note G3.

Fingerings:

Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1 through 6 below the notes. For example, in measure 14, the notes G4, A4, and B4 are fingered 6, 6, and 6 respectively. In measure 18, the notes C4, D4, and E4 are fingered 6, 6, and 6 respectively.

Other Markings:

There are several other markings throughout the score, including slurs, accents, and dynamic markings (e.g., *mf*, *f*, *ff*). The score is written in a clear, professional style, typical of a published musical score.

Appendix B

Prelude de M^{lle} Blavet. SUTTE en d^{re} la, re.
Ti' tendrement.

The musical score is written for piano and features a single melodic line on a grand staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The piece is marked 'Ti' tendrement.' and includes several dynamic markings such as 'f' (forte) and 'p' (piano). The notation includes various musical symbols like slurs, ties, and accidentals. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and the overall structure is a single continuous melody.