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Baroque Tempo

Tempo Gradations in Purcell's Sonatas

Mary Cyr

Performers have not failed to notice the perplexing nature of some of Purcell's tempo markings. This is true of the Italian indications in the sonatas, as it is also with the occasional English words in the fantasias. In either case one is confronted with differences of character as well as speed; at the same time the markings seem to allow the performer a certain latitude.¹ This situation should not necessarily lead us to conclude that Purcell's tempo indications are "unreliable and inconsistent in their connotations."² Rather it suggests that we must look for other clues concerning tempo and consider these along with the tempo markings themselves.

¹For a reassessment of issues related to tempo in Purcell's music, see Klaus Miehling, "Das Tempo bei Henry Purcell," *Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 15 (1991): 117-47. Relying on theoretical advice from Thomas Mace and several French theorists, Miehling proposes metronome equivalents for Purcell's meter signatures and tempo markings.

²Robert Donington, "Performing Purcell's Music Today," in *Henry Purcell (1659-1695): Essays on His Music*, ed. Imogen Holst (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 87.

The fantasias and sonatas, despite their close chronological relationship,³ differ considerably as regards tempo markings. In the fantasias, relatively few are indicated, and when they do occur a change is signaled with an oblique stroke (/) and a word such as "brisk," "slow," or "drag." None of the fantasias has a tempo mark at the beginning, and the only meter signatures are C and $\text{C}\flat$. The latter seems to imply a slightly faster tempo than common time, and does not carry the implication of being twice as fast.⁴ Purcell apparently called upon the words "slow" and "drag" in similar ways. The discernible differences are simply that "slow" is by far the more frequent choice for passages with chromaticism and suspensions, and a dotted rhythm is often featured as well (see Ex. 1). "Drag" may imply a *ritardando*, since note values increase whenever Purcell draws upon this marking.⁵ Nor does there appear to be an obvious difference between Purcell's words "brisk" and "quick." From their contexts, we can speculate that "quick" may imply a slightly faster tempo than "brisk," since the note values in "quick" sections tend to be constant 8th notes and, in one case, 16th notes (see Examples 2a and 2b), whereas the note values in "brisk" sections tend toward a combination of 8th- and quarter-note motion. "Quick" also appears in conjunction with the meter $\text{C}\flat$, whereas "brisk" occurs in movements written in C. "Brisk" may also refer to a more staccato articulation, since Thomas Mace employs the marking of "briskly" in this sense to contrast with "gently or smoothly."⁶

Although tempo marks appear with greater frequency in his sonatas, Purcell uses them with no more precision than he does in the fantasias. A comparison of the advice Purcell offered about tempo in *A Choice Collection of Lessons for the Harpsichord or Spinnet* (London, 1696) with that of several English contemporaries suggests a common interpretation for most duple and triple meter signatures (see Table 1).

³The publication dates of Purcell's two sets of sonatas (1683 and 1697) tell us little of their true chronology, for most of the pieces were probably written in the early 1680s, during the same period as the fantasias and pavans. See Michael Tilmouth, "The Technique and Forms of Purcell's Sonatas," *Music and Letters* 40 (1959): 109-21.

⁴See Ellen TeSelle Boal, "Purcell's Clock Tempos and the Fantasias," *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society* 20 (1983): 24-39, esp. 32-37, for a discussion of C and $\text{C}\flat$ in the 17th century and earlier.

⁵Boal, "Purcell's Clock Tempos," 36.

⁶*Musick's Monument* (London, 1676; repr. New York: Broude, 1966), 133.

Example 1. From *Fantasia* no. 8⁷

35 *Brisk*

44 *Slow*

47

⁶*Musick's Monument* (London, 1676; repr. New York: Broude, 1966), 133.

⁷*Fantasias and In Nomines*, ed. Thurston Dart (London: Novello & Co., 1959), p. 21.

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Example 2a. From *Fantasia no. 1*⁸



Example 2b. From *Fantasia no. 3*⁹



⁸*Fantasias and In Nomines*, p. 2.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

Table 1. Comparative descriptions of time signatures.

	Christopher Simpson, <i>A Compendium of Practical Musick</i> (London, 1678)	Nicola Matteis, <i>Ayres. . . and likewise other Passages [for the violin]</i> (London, 1685).	John Playford, <i>An Introduction to the Skill of Musick</i> (12th ed., London, 1694)	Henry Purcell, <i>A Choice Collection</i> (London, 1696)
C	"Common Mood. . . sometimes with a dash or stroke through it, thus, \dot{C} ."	"slow Time that is called Common Time"	"Common-Time. . . the first and slowest of all"	"a very slow movement"
\dot{C}		"faster"	"The second sort of Common-Time is a little faster, which is known by the Mood, having a stroak drawn through it, thus \dot{C} ."	"a little faster"
\dot{P}	"play'd or sung twice so quick. though many dash it so without any such intention"	"very swift that is call'd Retort"	"The third sort of Common-Time is quickest of all, and then the Mood is retorted thus \dot{P} ."	ϕ "a brisk and airy [<u>sic</u>] time"
$\frac{3}{2}$	"Tripla time. . . The more common Tripla, is three Minims to a Measure, each Minim about the length of a Crotchet in Common time." "Sometimes the Tripla consists of three Semibreves to a Measure, each Semibreve being shorter than a Minim in Common time."	"slower [than 3/4] except it be thus Bar'd $\frac{3}{4}$ which goes quick according to the French cur[re]nt Time"	"first and slowest Tripla-Time, marked 3/2"	"three Minims in a barr. . . commonly play'd very slow"
$\frac{3}{4}$		"slow Triple"	3 or 3/1 "faster" [than 3/2]	$\frac{3}{1}$ "three Crotchets in a barr, and they are to be play'd slow" $\frac{3}{3}$ [also three crotchets to a barr] "but is played faster"

For finer nuances of speed and articulation, the meter may provide a clue, however the best guide will be the melodic and harmonic motion and presence of dissonance or chromaticism. Some of the apparent inconsistencies in Purcell's tempo marks may be resolved when one considers them in the context of three large categories: fast, moderate, and slow. These correspond to the three categories Purcell describes in a well-known passage from his 1683 preface:

It remains only that the English Practitioner be inform'd, that he will find a few terms of Art perhaps unusual to him, the chief of which are those following: *Adagio* and *Grave*, which import nothing but a very slow movement: *Presto* *Largo*, *Poco Largo*, or *Largo* by itself, a middle movement: *Allegro*, and *Vivace*, a very brisk, swift or fast movement . . .

It should be noted that the word "movement" means tempo or speed in the context of his descriptions. Each of the categories will be discussed briefly in the following.

The first, or slowest, category includes the marks *adagio* and *grave*. Both marks typically occur in sections with suspensions and other expressive dissonances and, like the "slow" sections in the fantasias, they frequently feature a dotted rhythm. A Lombard rhythm is found occasionally in an *adagio*, as in Sonata no. 3 (1683), m. 16, although it is a relatively unusual rhythmic notation in the sonatas. In the 1983 collection, the meter most often used for either *adagio* or *grave* is ♩ , whereas in 1697, C is by far the most frequent. Rather than denoting any proportional relationship, Purcell's C and ♩ merely follows 17th-century English practice in indicating either similar speeds or C denoting a slightly faster tempo (see Table 1).¹⁰ In Sonata no. 6 (1697), one finds an unusual example of *Adagio* at the beginning of a sonata in 3/4. This entire work, indeed, is unusual, since it consists of a single movement with a ground bass rather than the more conventional succession of contrasting sections. Here *adagio* may refer to the relatively moderate speed of this triple meter, and Purcell may have intended the marking to serve as a warning not to play too fast.¹¹

That *adagio* and *grave* imply no fundamental difference in speed can be demonstrated by comparing passages such as the *grave* of Sonata no. 10 (1683) and the *adagio* of Sonata no. 9 (1683). Both feature a dotted rhythm,

¹⁰Boal, "Purcell's Clock Tempos," 33.

¹¹Compare, for example, Purcell's use of "slow" in the triple-meter aria, "Ah, Belinda," from *Dido and Aeneas*.

homophonic or near-homophonic texture, and a meter of C (Example 3a and 3b).

Example 3a. From *Sonata no. 10* (1683)¹²

88 Grave

The designation "grave" is more likely to be found within a piece, whereas "adagio" most often is found at the beginning of a sonata. Otherwise, their use is virtually interchangeable, which we can see from a section that is marked "grave" in the printed parts of Sonata no. 2 (1697) but "adagio" in Purcell's autograph manuscript.¹⁴ The principal characteristics of a slow section may be seen in the modal shifts and dissonances, especially suspensions and *échapés*, chromaticism, and a single dotted figure (Example 4).

Example 4. From Sonata no. 2 (1683)¹⁵

78 Adagio

b4 6
2 b5

4
2

7 7

2

b4
2

7 7

8 b7

7 6 7 6

b3

¹⁴Purcell's autograph manuscript (London, British Library, Add. Ms. 30930) consists of three folio-size volumes. Seven complete sonatas in score and fragments of another are included there, along with the fantasias and the four-part *Chacony*. Part of the volume contains sacred vocal music and the inscription "The Works of Hen. Purcell Anno Dom. 1680." Only Sonata no. 7 has a complete basso continuo line with figures; in the other sonatas Purcell left a blank staff under the three string parts on which the continuo part could have been entered later. Numerous differences can be found between the autograph manuscript and the printed edition, and it is not always possible to determine which represents the more authoritative version. Except as noted, the observations in this article relate primarily to the two printed collections.

¹⁵*Sonatas of Three Parts*, pp. 17-18.

85 Vivace

Fingerings: 7 6 5 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7 6

The second category of tempo comprises a "middle" group of tempo marks between slow and fast. These include "presto largo," "poco largo," and "largo." These marks are always associated with either $3/4$ or $3/2$, and are most often found as internal, contrasting sections. Occasionally, they may also serve as final sections, as in Sonatas nos. 1 and 11 (1683) and Sonata no. 4 (1697). Whereas four examples of "poco largo" are present in the 1683 set (Sonatas 3, 4, 8, 12) all of which are in $3/2$, none are to be found in the 1697 set, and even for largo sections, $3/2$ is a rare choice for a meter signature in the 1697 collection. Some of the "middle" or moderate tempos have a dotted rhythm and the character of a sarabande, such as the binary largo in $3/4$ in Sonata no. 1 from 1683 (see Example 5).

Example 5. From *Sonata no. 1* (1683)¹⁶

120 Largo

Fingerings: 2 6 5 6 6 4 3

¹⁶*Sonatas of Three Parts*, p. 10.

A largo in 3/4 often features the violins in parallel thirds, and may use imitation as well (Exs. 6a and 6b).

Example 6a. From *Sonata no. 6* (1683)¹⁷



Example 6b. From *Sonata no. 11* (1683)¹⁸



The third category of tempo, the fastest one, includes the markings "allegro," "presto," and "vivace." These sections are most often imitative,

¹⁷ *Sonatas of Three Parts*, p. 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

with a subject up to four measures in length, and Allegro is also a favorite choice for the final section of a sonata. Frequent leaps often suggest a staccato articulation with the bow (Example 7).

Example 7. From *Sonata no. 1* (1683)¹⁹

25 Vivace

Violin I

Violin II

BASS VIOL

ORGAN

30

When the allegro resembles a gigue, it is written in 6/8 or 12/8 (Ex. 8); more often, the allegro is in 3/4 or 3/8.

¹⁹*Sonatas of Three Parts*, pp. 2-3.

Example 8. From *Sonata no. 2* (1683)²⁰

119 Allegro

Violin I

Violin II

BASS VIOL.

ORGAN

7 6 7 6

7 6

Vivace also occurs in C , $3/2$, and $3/4$, and 16th-note motion is most often associated with both presto and vivace. The meters C and C appear once again to be virtually the same, since the beginning of Sonata no. 7 (1697), marked vivace and C in the printed edition, occurs in Purcell's autograph in a slightly different version written in C .

A frequent type of section within the fast category of tempo is the fugal canzona. Eight of the 12 sonatas of 1683 include a section called canzona, usually placed second following an opening adagio.²¹ In most cases, the word canzona itself appears to imply a brisk tempo, although four of the 1697 sonatas also bear the mark allegro in addition. Again, there appears to be little difference in speed between canzonas notated in C or C , although C predominates in 1683, whereas most canzonas in 1697 are in C .

In addition to these three major categories of tempo, some other uses of tempo marks exist, such as "adagio," to imply a ritardando. Either a shift of

²⁰*Sonatas of Three Parts*, p. 20.

²¹On the varied placement of the canzona in North Italian and Roman sonatas, see Peter Allsop, *The Italian "Trio" Sonata from Its Origins until Corelli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 194.

meter or a tempo mark, or both, may signal a ritardando, especially when chromatic motion is present, as in Sonata no. 3 (1683), where Purcell uses an increase in note values to bring about a ritardando at the end of the canzona and then marks a new section adagio. The ritardando thus provides a smooth connection between the canzona and the ensuing adagio. At the end of Sonata no. 5 (1683), a ritardando is implied without change of meter because of an absence of 16th-note motion and a marking of "adagio." The effect of a ritardando may also be achieved without a tempo mark through a change of meter only, as in Sonata no. 2 (1683), where the 6/8 allegro concludes with four measures in C , implying a slower tempo (Example 9).

Example 9. From Sonata no. 2 (1683)²²

161

VIOLIN I

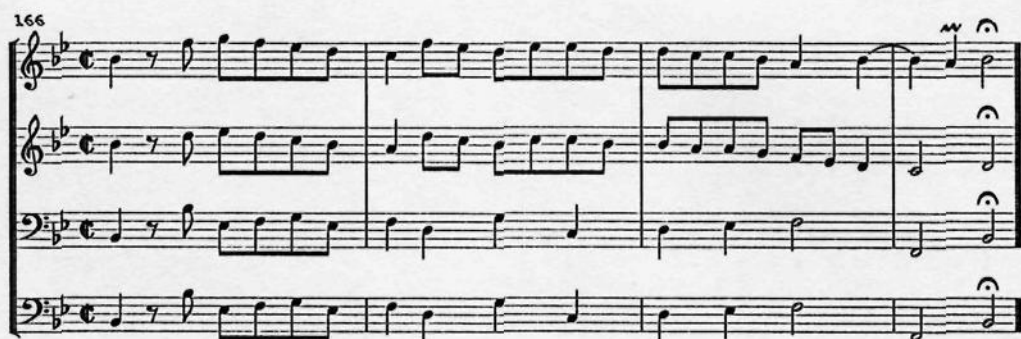
VIOLIN II

BASS VIOL.

ORGAN

6 5
4 3

²²Sonatas of Three Parts, p. 23.



It may be that the presence of the mark "adagio" in the last four measures, together with the longer note values, indicates a more prominent *ritardando* for the end of the piece. Another use of *adagio* as a *ritardando* is found in Sonata no. 12 (1683), where the final section in 3/8 closes with a 4-measure *adagio* in C. Such a closing *ritardando* may either bear no thematic relationship to the preceding section (as it does here), or it may continue with a similar motive as in Sonata no. 1 (1697), which ends with a grave after a *vivace* (Ex. 10).

Having reconsidered Purcell's tempo gradations in the contexts of theoretical evidence from his contemporaries as well as musical evidence, are we any closer to sorting out the puzzling marks and their apparent inconsistencies? I think it is possible to propose a few practical guidelines for interpreting Purcell's tempo marks. First, despite the close chronological proximity of the fantasias and sonatas, Purcell's choice of tempo marks and meters appears to differ substantially in the two types of pieces. Purcell uses "slow" and "drag" in similar contexts in the fantasias, although "slow" in expressive, chromatic passage may suggest a slightly slower, more sustained character than elsewhere. "Drag" may also be used to indicate a *ritardando*. "Brisk" and "quick" are used in similar ways to indicate faster tempos in the fantasias; from their contexts, we can speculate that "brisk" implies a slightly faster tempo and a more staccato articulation.

Example 10. From Sonata no. 1 (1687)²³

149

VIOLIN I

VIOLIN II

BASS VIOL

ORGAN

6 7 #6 # 6 6 6

154

6 6 6 6 6 6 7 6 6 6 #

²³*Sonatas of Four Parts*, ed. Michael Tilmouth in *The Works of Henry Purcell*, vol. 7 (London: Novello & Co., 1981), p. 10.



In the sonatas, we have observed that Purcell's practice of using Italian tempo marks was similar to that of his contemporaries. Some of the ambiguities may be resolved if we consider his markings within three large categories, which Purcell himself described as slow, moderate, and fast. The "slow" category features the marks "adagio" and "grave" in similar contexts and nearly always duple meter. The word "largo" can be found in tempo marks belonging to the moderate category, which are most often written either in $3/4$ or $3/2$. It appears that $3/2$ had fallen out of use by the time Purcell's 1697 collection was published, for it is absent there. Fast tempos include allegro, presto, and vivace, and these marks may also imply a staccato articulation in some contexts. These marks are found in combination with both duple and triple meters, and 16th-note motion is especially common in sections marked presto or vivace. There appears to be no discernible difference between C and C when used in quick tempos, and the word canzona by itself probably denotes a brisk tempo. Other variations in tempo such as a ritardando may be implied by the word adagio or merely by a change of meter.

Performers may conclude that the range of possible tempos within Purcell's three categories of fast, moderate, and slow still remains relatively broad. Some of the ambiguities of interpretation may be reduced, however, by examining each of the indications closely in the context of meter, harmonic motion, and other musical characteristics. In making our final choice of tempo, perhaps we will have come closer to an understanding of both the latitude Purcell allowed and the boundaries within which 17th-century players functioned.