

Lecture 10 Stylistic Awareness in Music of the Baroque

Generalities

As we enter the Baroque period (1600-1750), one does not find the one all-powerful Church one found in the period of the Renaissance, that being Catholicism. Instead we encounter the strengthening of Lutheranism with the Counter-reformation in Catholicism. The function of music within the two Churches differed.

Monteverdi's first opera employed the use of the solo song through the recitation (prose rhythm of the text) and the aria (metrical organization). The recitation (recitative) fulfilled the great desire to project words clearly, interpreting primarily from the text; when an aria was performed, the interpretation came more from the musical connotation. The Baroque period was primarily a revolt against elaborate counterpoint as composers now wanted to get the words heard more plainly. True there is counterpoint, particularly in Schütz and Bach, but it was more a 'throw-back' to what had been prevalent before. Bach's sons did not view their father's compositions with unusual admiration; he was simply behind the times.

We see a new emphasis on dramatic expressiveness as determined by the word. One cannot overlook the text in the Baroque, but it was not the structural element it was in polyphony or yet the emotional element of the Romantic. In this period musical structure was determined more and more by harmonic implication. Thus the change from Renaissance polyphony to the Baroque constituted one of the most drastic changes of emphasis in the history of music, second only to the revolution as we moved from Impressionism to the 20th Century!

Specifics

Rhythm

Baroque music is much more metrical. With the advent of the bar line at the close of the Renaissance period because of the complexity of the music, we find regular accentuations at regularly spaced intervals. Syllable stress was not the dominant factor in the establishment of rhythm. Rather than starting anywhere within the phrase, rhythm now becomes very regular at regularly spaced intervals.

The obvious positive advantages of metrical regularity also had a negative side. Beat one became so dominant as to take away a 'dance feeling'. The natural accents of a given measure gave a 'square feeling'

by nature of their undue importance. Duple rhythm especially could take on a pneumatic feeling (as in an air hammer), constant regularity.

Early in my musical career, I attended a wonderful Evensong at St. Mark's Episcopal in Seattle. As I congratulated Peter Hallock, he said simply: "Well, all music must dance!" I did not question him further, but I continued to reflect on his statement. A somber Lenten hymn must dance? A march? I understood how applicable this concept would be to triple meter, but duple?

Prior to meeting Hallock, I had spent two six-week sessions with Robert Shaw in San Diego. I had recognized he approached rhythm in a manner somewhat foreign to me. I felt the difference as we sang with him day after day. I liked it, but what was the underlying principle – how could I verbalize it? His music danced! For him rhythm was not only timing but also spacing.

Several years later when sharing with an instrumental colleague, I mentioned how intrigued I was with the 'Shaw feeling' but I found it so hard to verbalize it. "Have you ever read anything on this type of phrasing?" "No". "Well, it is documented in a Doctoral Thesis at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Get a copy from their library." Soon I was reading a thesis entitled *Note Grouping - A Method For Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance* by James Thurmond. I could not put it down. I had found gold. I knew the fundamental principle to make all music dance! The term 'Baroque Phrasing' became part of my musical vocabulary. I had a core curriculum of basic principles governing phrasing that prevailed at the time. And to my delight these principles prevailed in subsequent periods of music as well. I did not have to teach from intuition alone!

Baroque phrasing emphasizes what happens on the weak beats and between the beats, quite opposite to the traditional concept of the dominating importance ascribed to primary accents (or natural accents) as customarily taught. Principal beats of the measure traditionally have been stressed through accent, a somewhat mechanical and unmusical technique. Rather the principal beat should be approached from the previous weak beat!

Was this difference of approach the reason the performance of one artist touches our spirit so deeply while another may be intriguing technically but seems to have not touched a deeper side of ourselves? As James Thurmond studied in detail the note grouping principles of Marcel Tabuteau, the great oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Baroque Phrasing principles quickly emerged (weak to strong).

Nothing in life desires to remain weak if it is designated as such. Strength is the recognized virtue. Natural accents are obviously the strong beats of a given measure. Weak beats are inherently present as well. Can a weak beat become strong? If so, there are two possibilities for consideration, the strong beat before the weak beat, or the strong beat following the weak beat. It is impossible to look back and become strong, but one can look ahead and derive strength. Weak to strong is the underlying principle of Baroque phrasing! Interestingly Scripture states: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness...For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (II Cor 9-10) Every weak note must never remain static but become strong by leading or ‘lifting’ into the strong beat that follows. A weak note then becomes an upbeat!

“After much study of the extant literature regarding interpretation, expression and musicianship, it has been found that there is an important relation between the way the arsis (or upbeat) is played, and the movement imagery present in the mind when one is listening to music. This imagery of movement, as will be seen later, actually does affect the *kinesthetic* nerve system and can cause the foot to tap, or incite in one the desire to dance. How many times have we heard someone say, ‘What a moving performance!’, or, ‘I was so moved by his playing!’? The Reverend William J. Finn, director of the Paulist Choristers, was cognizant of this relationship when he wrote: ‘The mystery of music is in the upbeat.’”
(Thurmond, p. 18-19)

There are four basic rules in the accomplishment of Baroque phrasing which in actuality are applicable to all subsequent periods. Shaw added a fifth one, which I will explain later.

Rule # 1 – Weak to Strong

Any weak beat must lead to a strong beat. Nadia Boulanger, the great French teacher of so many of our great musicians as Bernstein, Sessions, Copland, Barber, Menotti etc. placed particular stress on the beat just before the bar line (i.e. 4 in duple meter). The weakest beat in any measure it just before the bar line. It must be lifted across the bar line to become strong with the energy of movement and flow of the phrase. Thus the term ‘cross-bar phrasing’ is also used in conjunction with Baroque

phrasing. The tyranny of the bar line must be overcome; the undue emphasis on beat one. As beat four must go to beat one, so must beat two (weak) lead to beat three. Triple meter is somewhat different which will be explained later.

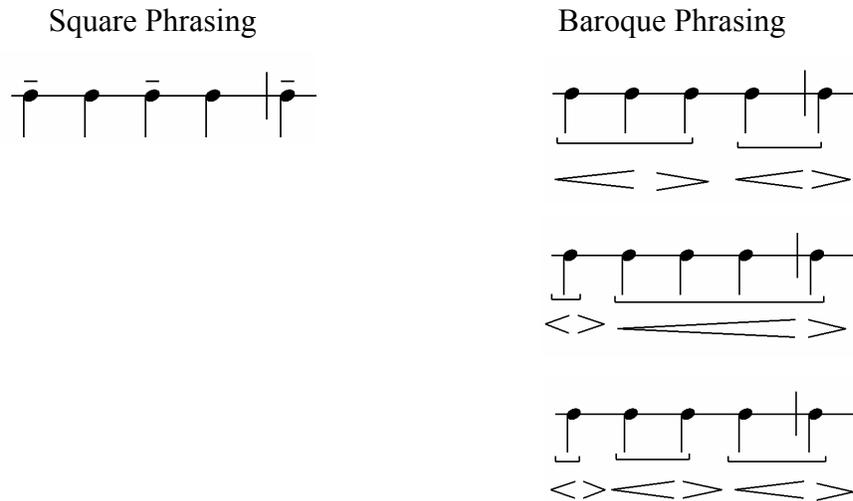


Figure 10.1 Weak to Strong phrasing for quarter note rhythms in duple.

Two basic terms come into being, thesis (*thetic*) and arsis (*arsic*). If one is going to write a paper, a basic theme must be presented. Thesis in Greek means to fall, a dominant point. Thus all strong beats are termed *thetic*. Arsis in Greek does not mean ‘weak’ as logic might determine. Interestingly it means to lift, to lead on to a destination – the weak beat then leading on to the strong.

The same basic principle applies in shorter time values as well. When two eighth notes are present, the first one is the stronger, the second one the weaker. The destination of the weaker one is paramount. When four eighth notes are present, the first one is the strongest and the fourth one the weakest. In a faster tempo rather than thinking the microcosm of the second eighth note going to the third (which it does) and the fourth going to the following note (which it does), one might feel the first eighth note as *thetic* but the following eighth notes are *arsic* all three leading on to the next down beat. Tempo could be a determinant as well as the composer’s preference.

Square Phrasing	Baroque Phrasing

Figure 10.2 Weak to Strong phrasing for eighth note rhythms in duple.

Look at sixteenth notes. Most often the first sixteenth is *thetic* with the remaining three being *arsic* leading to the next down beat. Yet in a subdivided passage, the second sixteenth might clearly go to the third one, and the fourth to the following down beat. Again tempo and the composer's taste become the determinant.

A function of a note might change. For example, if a measure consists of two half notes in 4/4 time, one might surmise both half notes are *thetic* in feeling. In this instance, however, the second half note is *arsic*, leading across the bar to the down beat.

Square Phrasing

Baroque Phrasing



Figure 10.3 Weak to Strong Sixteenth Notes in Duple.

Rule #2 – Short to Long

Shorter time values always lead to longer time values. This is really a further clarification of rule #1 in that the shorter time value is always weak, the longer time value being strong. Shorter time values can be viewed in two different ways. A quarter note followed by two eighths followed by a quarter – here the two eighths can be viewed collectively as weaker. The second perception of ‘short to long’ is more obvious, such as a dotted quarter followed by an eighth. The eighth is the weaker and thus must lead on to the stronger beat that follows.

Square Phrasing

Baroque Phrasing



Figure 10.4 Short to Long Phrase Groupings

Now I want to introduce a term I have coined – springboard. Let us examine more closely the dot of the dotted quarter note. It rhythmically is an eighth note, making that eighth note *thetic* in relationship to the actual eighth note that follows. If it is viewed as *thetic*, it must have ‘energy’ – it must have strength – it must have emphasis. It must function as a ‘springboard’ to the eighth that follows. This can be realized by some emphasis being placed on the dot, especially by the conductor. In certain instances, Shaw would ask that an eighth rest be sounded on the dot, or maybe a dotted sixteenth to give clarity both of precision and emphasis, with the eighth note following leading on to the next stronger beat. The same principle with a dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth, etc.

Rule #3 – Repeated Notes

Repeated notes are often separated, again a further subdivision of the basic ‘weak to strong’. As I mentioned above a shorter time value can be viewed as a quarter note followed by two eighth notes followed by a quarter. But much more often, the two repeated notes have a feeling of

separation. Shaw would state this so elegantly: “Don’t sing successive 8th notes as equal values –sing the second one as a point of departure.” If two eighth notes are not thought in this manner, tempo will invariably rush, and the intensity of the phrase will be immediately be lessened as to its forward motion.



Figure 10.5 Grouping Repeated Notes

Rule #4 – Change of Song

If the melodic line changes direction, the melodic turn determines the necessity of the notes after the turn being treated as weak, with the note preceding the turn being treated as strong or *thetic*. The following weak notes are *arsic* in direction. If you look at the example given subsequent to this explanation, it will become immediately clear. How this enhances the flow of the phrase, as there is a new burst of kinetic energy!



Figure 10.6 Change of Song

You can easily teach the above rules through the use of this simple poem:

Weak to strong, Short to long,
Repeated notes, Change of song.

Rule #5 – Just Because I Feel Like It!

Who else would dare add this rule! Think how deeply Shaw trusted his basic instinct – a challenge to all of us!

Now to triple meter. Baroque realization can be accomplished in two different ways, depending on the intent of the composer. It can be just beat three being led across to beat one with beat two being the realization of the down beat (in other words minimized), or it can be both beats two and three being led to beat one. The difference is quite stark and should be realized by determining the intent of the composer. The example in Figure 10.7 illustrates this.

Square Phrasing



Baroque Phrasing

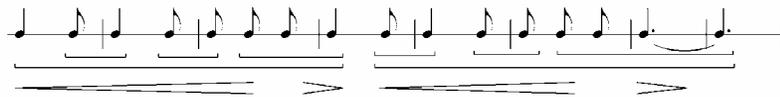


Figure 10.7 Triple Meter Grouping

I explained my use of the term ‘springboard’ in the ‘short to long’ explanation. May I take this a bit further. Rests have a definite function in most instances. Visualize a 4/4 bar consisting of a quarter rest followed by three quarter notes. The rest is more often viewed as a moment of silence. This is wrong! The rest must be felt as *thetic*, with the following three quarter notes as *arsic* to the down beat, or in a slower tempo, the first quarter note being *arsic* leading to beat three which would be *thetic*. In other words your rest is a springboard, and the conductor must energize the downbeat to signal such. If this is not perceived in this manner, the first quarter note will always be felt as *thetic* and this is absolutely wrong! Sometimes rests in the Romantic period are treated as moments of silence to enhance the drama of the moment. One must delineate between the two possible functions of rests.

What is the function of a tie? Just to lengthen the note of the preceding note? Absolutely not! The second note of the tie must be viewed as a springboard as well, functioning as a *thetic* note, with the note following the tie then being *arsis* in direction. The first note of the tie is *arsic* leading to the strong beat second note of the tie. A static moment is avoided – the flow of the line is enhanced!

How does syncopation fit into this? One day in a rehearsal Shaw pointedly asked me: “Weston, in syncopation do you feel the stress on the down beat of the off beat?” Flustered I gave the answer “the off beat”. “Wrong, Weston, you always feel the down beat in syncopation to get the feeling of the off beat.” In other words in syncopation you give the down beat part of the syncopation a *thetic* feeling which then gives the second part of the syncopation a energetic *arsic* feeling. Interesting in jazz, it is just the opposite. I will never forget that moment with Shaw as long as I live!

How does one accomplish this realization of space between the *thetic* note and the following *arsic* note? The realization of this space results in the beginning of a new point of kinetic energy in the phrase, which is vital to fine music making. It is accomplished in two ways: the schism or indentation resulting in space may be an actual moment of space, which I term ‘sunlight’. Or it may be accomplished in a mental sense, the resulting space being accomplished through ‘mist’. The use of either depends on tempo, style and degree desired. I feel the most sensitive performer mentally lifts at moments even though not directly indicated within the phrase. It is a wonderful constant subdivision!

Directors do not have time to explain every moment when Baroque phrasing is desired. It can be beyond the comprehension of the singers as well. If the instructor sings a passage with the desired result of this type of phrasing, but substitutes a ‘day’ for every *thetic* moment and a ‘tay’ for every *arsic* moment, the choir will sing back what was emulated and it will follow every basic rule of Baroque phrasing. And the music will immediately dance! The choir will respond with relative ease, simply because it feels so natural to be sung this way basically speaking! One might use ‘du’ ‘tu’ ‘du’ in passages that are quieter and the ranges not as extreme. A definite mood is realized enhancing the beauty of the selection being learned. Recordings by the Swingle Singers are excellent examples of the use of syllables to enhance rhythmic groupings. Bach ‘swings’ or dances as never before. Students are obviously drawn to this rhythmic feel.

Here are several rehearsal methods for gaining the feeling of a springboard: have the choir members tap on the dot, rest, tie, or downbeat

syncopation or the director may do the same. I often bob my head slightly adding kinetic energy to the springboard. Shaw would often ask us to put a sixteenth rest within a dot or tie, creating space. This is particularly true in a larger ensemble.

Remember all composers do not follow Baroque phrasing consistently. They may intentionally ask for a different phrasing to avoid monotony and to achieve individuality. One can trust the marking of Romantic composers in this regard. Prior to this period, the realization can be more complicated. In depth study of the original score or style of the period are two factors that can help guide your decisions.

The above discussion is Baroque phrasing in the microcosm – one burst of kinetic energy to the next, arsis to thesis. Several microcosms put together can have an umbrella feeling of *arsic* or *thetic*. As more and more microcosms are put together, ultimately a musical phrase is the result.

The presence of a text gives singers a decided advantage in realizing the rules in our poem. Since articles and adjectives (usually weaker words) naturally lead to nouns, pronouns, and verbs (usually stronger words), a well-set text enhances the ‘weak to strong’ principle. The string player also has a decided advantage since often bowings are determined by the ‘weak to strong’ approach. Woe to the wind, keyboard, and percussion families – there are no built-in aids for you! It must be articulated!

I remember so well the day when I began to realize I naturally followed the above rules to a certain degree. Understanding the rules thoroughly gave me a solid vehicle for teaching rather than having an ensemble mimic back what I either sang or instructed. Shaw gave us a new definition of rhythm. Rhythm is obviously timing, but now we must add the word SPACING! There is a world of difference! I end this section of Baroque characteristics with a Shaw quote: “Togetherness comes from a divided pulse – think 16th notes!”