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THE SNARES AND DELUSIONS OF MUSICAL RHETORIC:  
SOME EXAMPLES FROM RECENT WRITINGS ON J. S. BACH

*"Ich verrichte dieses zugleich mit der größten Bequemlichkeit, weil ich mir die Mühe ersparen kann, zu den gewöhnlichen Zierrathen aus der Redekunst meine Zuflucht zu nehmen."*

"In addition, I perform this with the greatest convenience because I can spare myself the trouble of having recourse to the usual embellishments of rhetoric."<sup>1</sup>

It is odd that this little comment of Marpurg, made on his willingness to write a preface to a work he much admired by a composer needing no bombastic recommendation, should have slipped the attention of those searching the theorists for hints on rhetoric as a key to musical understanding in so-called baroque music. Does it not suggest two rather important things about the Art of Speech? — that rhetoric as an art is by nature conventional in the rather negative sense, and that rhetoric is an ornamental feature which can be ignored where a genuinely unsolicited feeling is involved. These implications themselves no doubt reflect a changing attitude to rhetoric, such that by 1750 it had come to mean something it may not have done in 1650<sup>2</sup>. But they also raise the question whether such extra-musical areas can be as usefully explored as some now claim. "Rhetoric" is not the only such area, and many oblique lines of attack are pushed forward by all thinking performers of old music: various salients on the *Affektenlehre* front, skirmishes with dance-manuals, thrusts from old fingerings ("learnt from old keyboards" etc), ornaments, tuning temperaments and so on. In some kinds of music, it is now obligatory to engage in "number symbolism": bars and even notes have to be counted before we can approach the mind of the composer. All such approaches have something to offer, and in view of the undeveloped level at which studies of certain vast questions in music still remain — for example, the origin and nature of Gregorian Chant — it seems a pity to pull down any edifices built in the last few years. But of all musicians, young performers need to be warned away from easy answers or from a doctrinaire adoption of any oblique angle-of-attack. One such angle is that summed up by the term Rhetoric.

\*

That there is an "aesthetic theory of the *empfindsamer Stil* of the later 18th century, formulated by J. Quantz and Ph. Em. Bach"<sup>3</sup> and now called *Affektenlehre* is not open to contention; nor that the term *Affekt* is "presumably a germanized form of *affetto*, a term much used by supporters of the *seconda prattica* or new expressive style of composition in Italy c1600"<sup>4</sup>; nor that figures of musical speech

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, preface to 1752 edition *Die Kunst der Fuge*; see *Bach-Dokumente* 3, ed. Hans Joachim Schulze, Leipzig/Kassel, 1972, 648.

<sup>2</sup> The wider changes in emphasis for a composer of the (later) Bach period and area are briefly sketched by George J. Buelow, "In Defence of J. A. Scheibe against J. S. Bach", *PRMA* 101 (1974/75), 85–100.

<sup>3</sup> Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, London, 1951, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* 1, London, 1980, 335.



(rhetoric) are the means by which such *affetti* are conveyed by composers, good and bad alike. Problems arise only when the theorists from Burmeister onwards<sup>5</sup> are scanned today in order to erect a system of *Affekten*, a rhetoric supposedly followed by important composers of that period. A key, a tempo, a tessitura, a pattern of notes: such elements in a late Monteverdi madrigal or an early Bach cantata are examined as *exempla* of a theory formulated by such-and-such a writer, and the conclusions are presented as if they were actually saying something more about the music than merely labelling its parts. A physicist knows that to say "this apple falls *because of gravity*" is to say nothing, merely to engage in verbal play and express a phenomenon in one way rather than another; musicians should be wary of indulging in similar semantics. I hope to show that there are positive benefits from a study of *figurae* in particular; but first, some examples of the way musical rhetoric is often understood today, beginning with specific details.

Key associations have long been understood as important, though there seems to be no study yet to show (1) whether a key was associated with an *affetto* merely by habit (the less common keys with more extreme *affetti*, etc), (2) if so, how or when such habits changed (is C minor for Mozart the same as C minor for A. Scarlatti?), (3) how far it was a question of the temperament involved, (4) how far differing pitches affected the associations, (5) whether diatonicism in fact simplified modal associations. Despite these problems, Mattheson's key-associations are often invoked<sup>6</sup>. For instance, over thirty years ago Hermann Keller in his account of J. S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue BWV 534 pointed out that F minor is a key of *Angst und Verzweiflung* ("anxiety and despair")<sup>7</sup>. This is not a bad description of, say, the heroine's state of mind at the end of Handel's solo cantata *Lucrezia*, when a dramatic piece of *recitativo secco* in F minor interrupts her peaceful E flat aria. But what has this to do with BWV 534? There is no verbal text, no graphic context, no broken momentum, no disjointed texture: rather a spacious sarabande-like binary prelude built on conventional toccata ideas (pedal points, *figurae*):



cf. Harpsichord Toccata BWV 914



<sup>5</sup> Joachim Burmeister, *Musica poetica*, Rostock, 1606, Facs.-Ed., Kassel/Basel, 1955 (*Documenta musicologica* 1/10).

<sup>6</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, Hamburg, 1739, Facs.-Ed. Kassel/Basel <sup>2</sup>1969 (*Documenta musicologica* 1/5).

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Keller, *Die Orgelwerke Bachs*, Leipzig, 1948.



followed by an equally spacious fugue with its own characteristics (entries and answers always on the same notes respectively; varied counter-subjects):



No performer is going to understand anything about this piece by reference to the key-associations of Mattheson or anyone else, not least because in this case nobody knows that F minor is its authentic key: it exists in one late source only, a source already doubtful in many details<sup>8</sup>. Even in the case of a chamber cantata, the key-association is not a straightforward matter. *Lucrezia* supports Mattheson, as would many another example of Italian vocal music from the period. But do all pieces in F minor support Mattheson? More important still: if they did support him (or rather, our referring to him), what does his phrase *Angst und Verzweiflung* tell us about *Lucrezia* that we cannot already hear in the music? Do we need Mattheson to tell us this about a piece? And if we did, what does this suggest about the piece?

If Mattheson's phrase about F minor is merely a theorist's observation on certain music already known to him, not a law for composers or a Platonic truth of infinite validity for performers, so is any theorist's list of musical figures of speech. In a recent essay, Timothy Albrecht<sup>9</sup> has analysed another genre-piece, the D minor Toccata BWV 565 and pointed out, for example, that in the first ten bars alone there is one figure after another: *epistrophe* (the opening exclamation, with a phrase of three gestures each ending on c# – d):

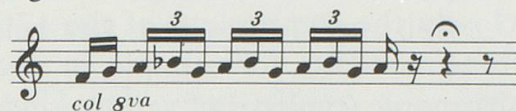


<sup>8</sup> That basing interpretations of Bach on unreliable sources can affect technical as well as aesthetic conjectures is clear from the essay by John Barnes, "Bach's Keyboard Temperament – Internal Evidence from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*", *Early Music* 7 (1979), 236–249, which, though well argued as to its results, makes two bold assumptions in the treatment of the music itself. These are that the two autograph volumes of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* give pieces in their original key, and that the musical notation can be relied upon to make it clear whether the player is to play a note "cleanly" or to allow it overlap another. Neither is verifiable from the sources as we know them.

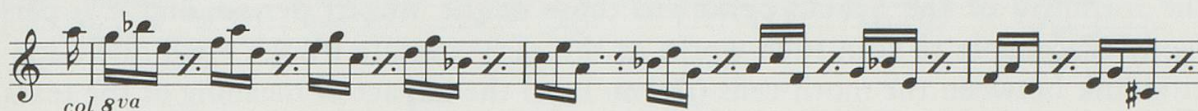
<sup>9</sup> Timothy Albrecht, "Musical Rhetoric in J. S. Bach's Organ Toccata BWV 565", *The Organ Yearbook* 11 (1980), 84–94.



*parrhesia* (the bold dissonance of the following Diminished 7th), *antitheton* (subsequent contrast, as the tempo increases with triplets), *anadiplosis* (repetition of the last note of one phrase as the first of the next), *circulatio*, *repetitio*, *gradatio* (a curling pattern of notes repeated on rising degrees of the scale), *ellipse* (sudden break-off of an intense figure):



*antimetabole* (repetition of notes in reverse order), *catabasis* (descent of the whirling triplet figure in bars 7–10):





means solo organ chorale-preludes or the accompaniment of congregational hymns, the general tenor of the remark is clear enough. Words have "meaning" and that meaning is to be "expressed" in music, that is, music is to provide a sound congenial to — or analogous to? — the feelings aroused by those words. The older music of J. S. Bach achieves its *Affekt* in different ways from that implied by Ziegler in 1746: it follows more closely the conventions of the 17th century, introducing chromatic 4ths at opportune moments, for example, or relying on Neapolitan 6ths and Diminished 7ths for harmonic emphasis of various kinds, or using familiar little note-patterns or motif-cells known more or less since the days of Schütz. Bach himself spans the period of change in the very meaning of the word *Affekt*, from the formulae of the Schütz period to those of the Mozart period, and it is perfectly reasonable to scan such works as the early cantata BWV 131 to find a specific link between the motif-cells (*figurae*) and the impact or meaning of the texts (*Affekten*). A particular pattern of notes, a particular texture, particular rests or sequences, will of themselves be reasonably associated with certain references in the texts set. This is especially so in the earlier choral music of J. S. Bach, music still far more closely related to traditional German idioms than to the new Italianisms that would alter the church cantata for ever. A good example of an analysis showing such links between *figurae* and *Affekten* can be seen in a recent essay by Lena Jacobson<sup>11</sup>.

But what is being implied by such analyses? A full catalogue of the *figurae* of Italian and (hence) German music from Monteverdi to J. S. Bach would yield a list of elements from which the music is made, just as a dictionary yields the words from which a play or poem is made. But does the playwright or poet use a dictionary in order to construct his piece from it? Did a composer use a theory book from which to make his motet or fugue? If a theorist merely lists the devices already used by composers (insofar as he understands them — he is not omniscient), and if the better the composer the more he will stretch the potential of the *figurae*, is the theorist relevant at all except beyond his alerting us to the basic nature of the *figurae* concerned?

It is fair, however, to point out that composers certainly always have been influenced by what they read or how they were taught, as they still are. What they create is even influenced by the notation they adopt, and one should be wary of making a mystery and a mystique out of the act of composition. But how do we assess the observations on BWV 131? That the composer had such figural-rhetorical ideas in his head from his training in the churches of different German provinces? That he consciously adopted them for this text? That had the theorists of his country, in particular Printz and Walther<sup>12</sup>, not been so much more interested in systematically discussing such *figurae* than their contemporaries in Italy, France

<sup>11</sup> Lena Jacobson, "Musical Figures in BWV 131", *The Organ Yearbook* 11 (1980), 60–83.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Caspar Printz, *Phrynis Mitilenaesus oder Satyrischer Componist*, Dresden/Leipzig, 1696, as well as Meinrad Spiess, *Tractatus musicus compositorio-practicus*, Augsburg, 1745, and Johann Gottfried Walther, *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition* [ms, 1708], ed. Peter Benary, Leipzig, 1955.



or England, he would not have been so systematic in the bar-by-bar construction of BWV 131? Is it not as likely to be the other way around? — that at this stage in his development, the composer of BWV 131 thought in certain musical terms naturally developed from e.g. the Schütz idiom, whose elements the theorists had labelled only after the event? If Monteverdi naturally introduces the little off-beat *figura suspirans* (239 below) for the harp obbligato during Orfeo's appeal to Caronte:



it does not mean that the same motif found in a Frescobaldi Toccata is an “appeal” to anybody. Nor is it a “sighing” or “appealing” *figura* in those variations of an organ partita of Pachelbel or Böhm or J. S. Bach that conventionally used it:

BWV 767.iii



Such *figurae* were part of the vocabulary of the composer, and for Schütz to use them in his vocal music was only to be expected. Because it has a text, BWV 131 is closer to a Schütz motet from this point of view than it is to the organ partita BWV 767. But it is still overvaluing the status of theorists-to-composers of the time to see BWV 131 as a series of *exempla* for their theories. Perhaps the most useful result of such analyses is to alert the musician to the fact that a later cantata, say BWV 248.1 (Christmas Oratorio), is not amenable to the same approach, that its characteristic melodies, phrases and musical motifs are more up-to-date, both more individual and more cosmopolitan than the “early German” style of BWV 131.

If the key of a piece, the details of its rhetoric and the allusiveness of its *figurae* are all open to interpretations culled from theorists of the time, so it seems are whole pieces or even sets of pieces. So plausible has it seemed to Ursula Kirkendale to interpret the whole of Bach's *Musical Offering* in terms of one classical treatise on rhetoric (the *Institutio oratorica* of Quintilian, c 92–95 AD)<sup>13</sup> that her recent essay even uses the term “source” for it, suggesting the term to be “a too narrow conception” when used to mean merely the written paper from which we know a piece of music. The “source” of such a piece can include “any *thought* which may have been a source of inspiration for the work”<sup>14</sup>. Quite apart from the termino-

<sup>13</sup> Ursula Kirkendale, “The Sources for Bach's Musical Offering: The *Institutio oratorica* of Quintilian”, *JAMS* 33 (1980), 88–141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. Gallus Dressler, *Elementa musicae*, Magdeburg, 1571.



logical inconvenience of this claim, it elevates an extra-musical conjecture to a position of influence which is not certifiable, and even cursory familiarity with music-history makes one doubt the usefulness of that. Nevertheless, the idea that the *Musical Offering* has a "source" in a treatise on rhetoric is an interesting one and one worked out in this case with a tempting plausibility. That such an approach is becoming increasingly common makes it necessary to be clear what the problems with it are.

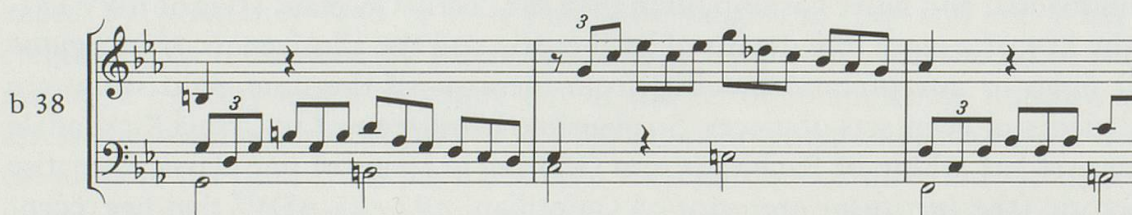
Firstly, there is an underlying assumption:

... Music theorists from Gallus Dressler (1559/60) to Mattheson (1739) did not stop with comparing the opening of a musical performance with the exordium of a rhetorical speech; *they wanted the entire composition to correspond to an oration*<sup>15</sup>.

But when a theorist refers to an opening movement, say in French *ouverture* style, as an *exordium*, is he doing more than offering an analogy? Can one really say that he "wants it to correspond to" an *exordium*? — and what exactly does "wants it to correspond to" mean? In any case, what exactly is an *exordium*? Any introductory or initial movement? If the putative first movement of the *Musical Offering* is the *Ricercar a 3* and if the "ricercar was still understood both as an initial and internal prelude in the baroque era"<sup>16</sup>, of what first movement in what longer work could that not be said? Is the prelude to *Die Walküre* an *exordium*? If not, why not? If so, what has labelling the *Ricercar a 3* an *exordium* actually said about it? And if the first label of a rhetorical scheme is open to such questions, is that not true of all of them, of all parts of "the entire composition" that in some sense "correspond to an oration", whatever that sense is?

Secondly, there is a tendency to "explain" gratuitously:

Spitta was at a loss to explain what he called the "strange episode" [in the *Ricercar a 3*, e.g. the triplet sequences]. Quintilian admits, somewhat ruefully, that nowadays "the judges themselves demand ... also to be charmed". Bach therefore interpolates the triplet idea which expresses joy and produces pleasure<sup>17</sup>,



Lurking behind this is nothing less than a bit of old-fashioned programmaticising: triplets express joy (the author then gives footnote references to triplet passages in joyful cantatas), and Quintilian is thus invoked in order to offer the kind of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 94 (italics mine).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., — but by whom? how exclusively? what does "understood as" mean?

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.



explanation made by Schweitzer for his *motifs de la joie* theory<sup>18</sup>. This is merely Schweitzer updated and made modish. One could say similar things about Mrs Kirkendale's view that the rising chromatic line of another fugal episode (bar 117ff) "expresses" the arrogance of a winning advocate in a court of law: Quintilian or not, to claim any musical figure whatsoever as "expressing" anything so concrete belongs to a datable musical aesthetic.

Thirdly, there is a tendency to use unreliable evidence: [Of the *Canones diversi* of the *Musical Offering*:] Only here are elements fully elaborated, in keeping with the technique of the *narratio longa*. For this reason Bach had added ... the heading "Thematis Regii Elaborationes Canonicae". The term *elaboratio* is, of course, also taken from rhetoric<sup>19</sup>.

Now however credulity is stretched to see that in planning the *Musical Offering* "Bach thus follows the example of Ovid (via Quintilian)", it certainly cannot be comforted by claiming *elaboratio* as a term "taken from" rhetoric. The *Andreas-Bach-Buch*, an important early source of keyboard music by J. S. Bach, Buxtehude and others, often uses it in some form or another: e.g. the C minor Fugue BWV 574, "Thema Legrenzianum. Elaboratum per Joan. Seb. Bach cum subjecto Pedaliter". J. G. Walther's copy of the B minor Albinoni fugue BWV 951 calls it "Fuga ... elaboratum et ad clavicembalum applicatum per Joa. Bast. Bachium"<sup>20</sup>. Evidently it was a term used in that circle of composers for pieces based on or worked out (at length) from somebody else's theme — as, of course, is the case with the *Musical Offering*. There is simply no need to seek it out in books on rhetoric.

Even more questionable is to interpret, again in the light of remarks by Quintilian, the *Crab Canon* as "natural" and the *Canon in contrary motion* as an "illusion of simplicity"; what musician would see either of these pieces in either of these ways were he to be free of predisposition? Or can it be seriously proposed that the *Ricercar a 6* is written for keyboard in order to have its subtle fugal entries made yet less conspicuous on an keyboard (because "the different voices are not distinguished by tone color"<sup>21</sup>) and thus its closeness to Ciceronian form confirmed (because the "optional second exordium" could be a passage of artful *insinuatio*, expressed here by a *ricercar* whose "voices enter unobtrusively in succession")? Is it not rather that the two *ricercars*, in complement to each other in number of parts, in type of fugal technique and in overall "style", provide yet another example of a favourite compositional activity of J. S. Bach: the providing of a pair of contrasted treatments? Conversely, if two pieces in the *Musical Offer-*

<sup>18</sup> It also seems strange to me to find it worth saying that "music theorists of Bach's time testify that the *alla zoppa* rhythm was then in high fashion", *ibid.*, p. 98. Why look to theorists? Can it not be seen from the music? If not, exactly in what respect does it matter what Mattheson or Spiess says?

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>20</sup> P. Williams, 1980, *op. cit.*, 238s.

<sup>21</sup> U. Kirkendale, *op. cit.*, 117.



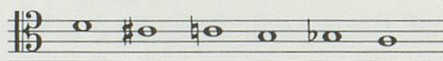
ing are so totally different in length and weight from each other as the whole four-movement *Trio Sonata* on one hand and the little *Canon per giusti intervalli* on the other, how can they possibly be regarded as equals ("two kinds of peroration") of the kind implied in a different context by Quintilian? And how can this *Canon* be given a place in a rhetorician's scheme when not a single one of the three clauses in the following description is justifiable? —

It is the most extraordinary contrapuntal coup in the *Musical Offering*, reserved by Bach for the conclusion of his work, the only canon to be performed.

\*

I have selected only a few of the many questionable claims or details in Ursula Kirkendale's essay as a warning to those hoping to find in rhetoric a solution to musical problems, for it is characteristic of such approaches that they purport to solve even the large-scale problems of such works as the *Musical Offering*, e.g. what order its pieces should be in and what is its instrumentation. The query "How did Bach come upon the idea of imitating Quintilian in music?"<sup>22</sup> begs far too many questions for the student to be satisfied by being told that the composer is known to have been accustomed to "conversing with rhetoricians on the relationship between rhetoric and music"<sup>23</sup>. Of course they are related; and of course a thinking composer will know that. But it is quite another matter to describe a specific piece of music in terms of a specific treatise. One cannot but be alarmed that the desk-bound ease with which such parallels are made will tempt others to propound similar ideas, seducing the student into thinking something has actually been said when an analogy is made or a label fixed.

The real value of making analogies is an indirect one: they alert the student to the compositional process of the composer, in particular his manipulation of style and his use of *figurae*. Only when the motif-cell structure of J. S. Bach's keyboard music is understood are we going to be able to approach the relevant style of performance (articulation, phrasing, tempo, etc). Labelling *figurae* can also become a desk-bound study made in isolation, and the problem with an over-enthusiasm in this field is that it can become a subsidiary study of rhetoric, a fact clear from a recent essay by Wolfgang Budday in which good figural analysis is pushed in the same Schweitzerian direction<sup>24</sup>. *Figurenlehre* is more important than this suggests. For example, an awareness of the nature of one *passus duriusculus* phrase:



not only alerts one to its ramifications in music from at least Sweelinck to at least Beethoven<sup>25</sup>, usually in exactly this form (a tonic-dominant chromatic 4th, in D

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Budday, "Musikalische Figuren als satztechnische Freiheiten in Bachs Orgelchoral 'Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt'", *Bjb* 63 (1977), 139–159.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Williams, "Figurenlehre from Monteverdi to Wagner", *MT* 120 (1979), 476–479, 571–573, 648–650, 816–818.



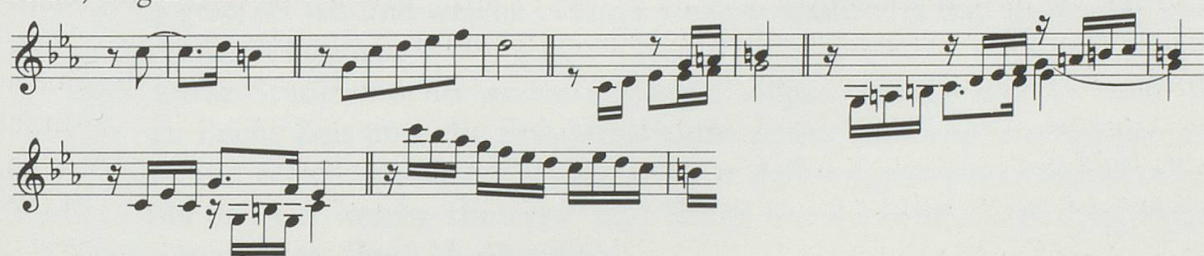
minor or *tonus primus*) but suggests that in the case of e.g. the chorale *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist* BWV 614 its fruitful and ingenious use is more “objective”, more a matter of “technical mastery” than the usual pathos-ridden performance of the chorale suggests. The last day of the year is not so very sad after all: J. S. Bach is merely engaged in the intricate compositional essay of using a time-honoured *figura*, a *figura* “pathetic” in the sense of baroque theorists but not “pathetic” in any modern sentimental sense. This is a crucial difference not fully brought out in Budday’s essay on another Bach chorale but one very relevant to a composer who took great pains all his life to use conventional *figurae* to the best of his ability. Compare his use of the *suspirans*, for example, with J. G. Walther’s:

J. G. Walther (cf. BWV 656)



Without wishing to criticize Walther unduly — he too was exploiting *figurae* to the best of his ability — one can at least claim that his own compositions prove him to have had a relatively simplistic idea of what composition with *figurae* could lead to, and it would be odd to expect to learn more from what he writes about it in his *Praecepta* of 1708 or *Lexicon* of 1732<sup>26</sup>.

Once alerted to the *figurae*, the performer can indeed infer some important clues about performance in general. For example, in the Passacaglia BWV 582 most of the *figurae* exploited so inventively in the variations (*sui generis* with the figural variations in Buxtehude’s chaconnes, also contained in the *Andreas-Bach-Buch*) begin off the beat:



But one variation specifically and almost uniquely slurs its figure on the beat (a detail preserved in the good sources):



<sup>26</sup> Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon*, Leipzig, 1732, Facs.-Ed., Kassel/Basel, 1953 (*Documenta musicologica* 1/3), and *Praecepta*, op. cit.



Clearly a distinction is intended between the two kinds of *figurae* — a distinction already clear enough to the eye, perhaps, but particularly clear once the player has grasped the significance of the overall compositional technique. Another example can be found in the autograph volume Book 2 of *The well-tempered Clavier*, where the F major prelude has slurs showing what the *figura* employed is, and therefore what the phrasing should be:



Without the slurs, the line looks like an off-beat quaver line; with them its true character as a series of on-beat *figurae* is made clear. The slurs are more, therefore, than mere phrase-marks. Indeed, once one has begun to look at so-called baroque music in this way, it becomes easier to understand why the question of “phrasing” and “articulating” in the notation did not arise as a matter of course, as it did in any fair copy of music written in later periods when *figurae* were forgotten. That in turn leads to fruitful speculation on the crucial characteristics of music in the period c1575–1775, more useful in my opinion than any speculation resulting from the fact that “musicologists have realized the importance of Kircher’s formulation *musica pathetica* for the new baroque style”<sup>27</sup>. As if one needed the terminological pedantry of a Jesuit rhetorician to tell us something we could or could not hear for ourselves in Monteverdi!

(August 1980)

<sup>27</sup> U. Kirkendale, op. cit., 122.