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# The Art of Musical Rhetoric in Haydn's Keyboard Music

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Derek Adlam

During a lecture on a musical topic, a distinguished scholar once paused and commented: "You know ... the great composers are much underrated!" Like much humour, this arresting but seemingly absurd remark concealed a profound truth. Frequently we are selective in our appreciation of a great composer's output, acknowledging certain works as incontestable masterpieces, but sometimes ignoring or undervaluing other areas of his output. This selectivity not only serves as a barrier to our understanding of that composer's work as a whole, but inevitably influences our appreciation of and insight into his acknowledged master works.

Joseph Haydn, 1732–1809, is one of these great composers who remain "underrated". The later symphonies and his quartets certainly take their place in today's standard, concert hall repertoire, but vast areas of his work remain surprisingly little known and seldom performed. Until quite recently, his keyboard music has been one such area. It has been regarded as useful for students, but with the exception of a few individual works, not thought to be of sufficient interest or quality to take its place in the concert hall. Yet, for Haydn, the keyboard was the foundation of so much of his art, and so many of his keyboard works perfectly encapsulate his musical genius.

In this, Haydn perhaps was himself a little to blame. He was characteristically modest when describing his ability as a keyboard performer, yet from his earliest years he was inseparable from his *klavier* (clavichord) and through diligent practice learned both to play the instrument well and to use it as an indispensable tool for composition. His understanding of its musical potential was so great that the keyboard can be said to have unlocked his musical imagination. Through it he developed new styles and textures in keyboard music, and also used it as the foundation for the evolution of the most important musical forms of his time.

The classical keyboard sonata was central to this development. It had grown out of bipartite solo keyboard pieces of the baroque era. These presented musical ideas or motifs that were developed through various devices and modulations until reaching a cadential mid-point, usually in the dominant key. The second section beginning in that key would then present further development of similar material, eventually returning and concluding in the home key. Within this simple structure there was considerable potential for the introduction of new, contrasting ideas and expressive effects. It is possible to see in this form



a parallel with the conventions of the art of rhetoric that was at the heart of European culture in the 17th and 18th centuries. The basic rhetorical process can be described as firstly, *inventio* – the finding or creation of ideas, secondly *dispositio* – the ordering of these ideas, and finally, *elocutio* – the expression of these ideas through appropriate words (*verba*). For the musician, the remaining two stages (*memoria* – learning or memorizing the words, and lastly, *pronuntiatio* or *actio* – the delivery of the oration) are in the hands of the performer, who may, of course, also be the composer of the work.

That contemporary musicians were aware of this parallel is demonstrated in Forkel's 1783 essay<sup>1</sup> on Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach:

A series of very lively concepts, strung together according to the principles of an inspired imagination, is an *ode*. Similarly, a series of lively, expressive musical ideas (sentences), if they are strung together according to the rule of a musically inspired imagination, is a *sonata*.

Forkel's definition of a sonata may be inadequate, but its importance lies in his observation that the spoken rhetoric of the ode (a lyric poem usually in the form of an address, or to be sung) has its equivalent in the musical rhetoric of the classical sonata. This definition may stem from C P E Bach's own understanding of the form's potential as expressed through his works. Bach seems to have been the originator of a most significant transformation of the bipartite sonata form, while in the process bringing it closer to a ternary structure. It is unfortunate that in his theoretical writing, Bach did not investigate the topic of musical forms, other than a chapter on the improvisation of Fantasies in his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*. To understand how he transformed the baroque sonata into its classical counterpart, the student must examine his music.

In this development, Bach changes the first half of a sonata movement into an exposition of two groups of ideas: the first group (A<sup>1</sup>) in the home, tonic key has an identifiable and consistent emotional identity or *affekt*. At its conclusion, new material (the transition) is introduced which through modulation reaches (usually) the dominant key. A second group of musical material (B<sup>1</sup>) is now introduced which contrasts in its *affekt* with that of group A<sup>1</sup> – if this had been extrovert and masculine, the second group might be introverted or feminine in character. Whatever the musical nature of each group of ideas, the principle is to establish contrast between them. Group B<sup>1</sup> concludes with a full close (usually in the dominant key) at the end of the exposition. The work now embarks on a 'free fantasy' or development section in which ideas drawn from

1 Johann Nikolaus Forkel „Ueber eine Sonate aus Carl Phil. Emanuel Bachs dritter Sonaten-sammlung für Kenner und Liebhaber, in F moll“, *Musicalischer Almanach für Deutschland auf das Jahr 1784*, Leipzig 1783, facsimile ed. Hildesheim 1974.

The quotation and detail above are taken from Tom Beghin's "Haydn as Orator", *Haydn and His World*, ed. Sisman, Princeton, 1997.



the exposition (or newly invented) are combined and worked out through a succession of keys and musical devices. This leads into the third section of the form, a recapitulation beginning with the repetition of the first ( $A^1$ ) group of ideas (either exactly or modified) in the home, tonic key. The transition group follows but through modification of the key structure concludes in the tonic key and introduces a repetition of the second group (now  $B^2$ ) transposed to the home key. This transformation of the material of both groups achieves a unification of their initially contrasted content. The movement is concluded by a coda made of material either newly invented or drawn from previously stated ideas.

The essential genius of this classical sonata form is its presentation of contrasting musical ideas. These, through the exercise of rhetorical musical devices, are ordered and expounded (as in a *dispositio*) until they become a single, united, musical argument convincing to the listener. This function is the heart of a rhetorical address, in which the principal purpose is to work on people's minds and emotions, and to influence and convince an audience of the truth and value of a given proposition.

Haydn was unquestionably well informed in the art of rhetoric, forming as it did the basis of the choir school education that he had received. He would have been familiar with the music of Viennese keyboard composers of his time that, from 1760 onwards, circulated increasingly through prints and in manuscript. We know that Haydn studied C P E Bach's theoretical writings and compositions closely. At the time of his death, his library was extensive and ranged through a great variety of topics from history, philosophy, poetry and musical theory to the occult sciences. He was, by any definition, a highly cultivated man who could apply his knowledge to the evolution of his art. One of the greatest contributions he made to his own growth as a composer and to music in general, was his realisation of the true potential of Bach's sonata form – developments that were to go far beyond anything previously conceived.

In later life, Haydn complained that young composers seldom develop their ideas fully: "they string together one little bit after another, and they break off before they have barely begun, but nothing remains in the heart when one has heard it<sup>2</sup>". Haydn's musical ability was quite different. His skill in the creative development of a simple musical unit or idea is demonstrated throughout his entire output. It can be seen, as if under a microscope, in an early work, the *Capriccio* in G major, Hob. XVII:1 which appeared in 1765. This work is a watershed in his music and in keyboard writing as a whole. Although, because of its basic material, it might at first seem amusingly naïve, in its progress it draws on the apparatus of rhetoric to an extraordinary degree and creates a musical structure of compelling elegance, originality and strength while inventing a range of entirely original keyboard sonorities.

2 Georg August Griesinger, *Biographische Notizen über Joseph Haydn*, 1810, trans. Mark Evan Bonds.



The *Capriccio* is a set of twelve variations, each of varying length and in a sequence of varied keys, based on a popular Austrian folk song that at about the same time was also used by the boy Mozart in his quodlibet *Gallimathias Musicum*. The choice of a very simple melody must have been deliberate on Haydn's part, and had a later parallel in Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. Beethoven dismissed Diabelli's theme contemptuously as 'cobbler's tack', but used it as the basis for one of his most profound keyboard works. Haydn's theme also gave him an opportunity to exercise his down-to-earth sense of humour, for the folk song, *Acht Sauschneider müassn seyn* is a child's counting song beginning:

Eight good men, it takes no more, takes no more,  
Then you can castrate a boar.  
Two in front, two behind,  
Two to hold, one to bind,  
Also, one to do the chore, do the chore.  
Eight good men, it takes no more.  
Seven good men, it takes no more, takes no more,  
etc. etc. ...<sup>3</sup>

The piece begins with a hesitant, nine bar statement of the theme, ending with a pause. This functions as a rhetorical *exordium* or *quaestio*, calling the audience to attention and stating the basic topic of the address to follow. A full declaration of the theme follows as a *propositio* or full statement of the material to be argued. A series of eight variations follows. They pass through a series of contrasting major and minor keys, the first four variations functioning like a sonata's exposition, and the next five being similar to a development section. These variations are a sequence of *probatio* (specific points to be tested or argued) and *refutatio*, counter-arguments rebutting these points. With the tenth variation we reach the beginning of a *conclusio* or the re-affirmation of the *propositio*. This recapitulation in the home key of G major is similar to a sonata recapitulation: Haydn has ingeniously given his variations something of the sonata's formal structure. The piece concludes in the twelfth variation with a brilliant coda, re-stating the *propositio* in such a way that there can be no possible denial of its truth! This ability to develop and transform short motifs is an essential part of Haydn's musical language. Essentially economical, it finds its way into every aspect of his music, and underpins his keyboard and symphonic writing. In his hands it is a fundamental tool used in building large-scale musical structures.

Haydn's development of sonata form follows the same principles. In the F major Sonata Hob. XVI:29 (begun about 1774) we see all the elements of the first movement form created by Bach, managed with wit and ingenuity. In it, the asymmetry of phrase length is at once unconventional yet typical of the

3 Quoted from *Joseph Haydn's Keyboard Music* by A. Peter Brown, 1986.



contemporary rococo aesthetic, giving the music a delightful tension. The first subject group consists of a six bar *exordium* or *quaestio* followed by a more lyrical five bar section, the *probatio*. A brief transition leads us to the dominant key and a longer second subject group, the *refutatio*, rounded off by a five bar codetta in the dominant key, consisting of motifs developed by cadential extension. Taken together, this first half of the movement is the *propositio*. In the following twenty-eight bar development, the conflict between *probatio* and *refutatio* is pursued, dominated by material taken from the first subject group, until in bar sixty, the *conclusio* begins with a triumphant restatement of the initial *exordium* in the home key. The *conclusio* is concerned with the reconciliation of the two, contrasted groups of musical ideas of the exposition or *propositio*. In this movement, Haydn has used the principles of rhetoric to take contrasting ideas and unite them into a cohesive whole.

Under the title *Sonata*, C P E Bach in his mature work usually proposed a three movement work. In this format, the first movement in *moderato* or *allegro* tempo usually has a solid and serious character, the second is slow and contemplative, and the concluding movement is swift and light. In Bach's hands, these movements give satisfactory variety to the whole work, but there is seldom any sense that each is anything more than a pleasing contrast to its companions in the set. In writing his three movement sonatas, Haydn devised various techniques for uniting the separate movements into a single, composite structure by careful management of their musical relationships.

The first of these techniques depends again on the principles of rhetoric controlling the overall design of a multi-movement sonata that then becomes a complete oration. We can regard the first movement of the F major Sonata Hob. XVI.29 as a *propositio* and *probatio* – that is, the presentation of the rhetorical argument. With the second movement we reach the *refutatio* or counter argument, which in this case, is in the subdominant major. This is an unusual choice of tonality: it creates a sense of the music suddenly stepping from the bright sunlight of the first movement into shadow as the second begins. The affirmative character of the first movement is re-established by a *finale* in the style of a swift minuet. This functions as the *conclusio* of the design. Once again we see here Haydn's gifts in writing sets of variations, although in this instance he runs his course in only four episodes.

In a second unifying technique, Haydn is concerned with the metrical relationship between individual movements. This can again be demonstrated by the F major Sonata: the first movement tempo indication is *Moderato* and a satisfactory metronome marking might be taken as a quarter note = 96. The expressive second movement, an accompanied cantilena of markedly operatic character, is marked *Adagio*. For this, a convincing tempo is achieved with a quarter note = 32. The indication at the head of the final movement is *Tempo di Menuet*, and from its musical character and its length (99 bars, or 198 when all indicated repeats are observed) it is likely that a fairly swift tempo is intended. A



successful tempo is achieved with a quarter note = 126. It must be stressed that these tempi are convincing when judged by a musical sensibility rather than by a mathematical rule. But it will be seen that, by adopting these tempi, the metrical relationship of the three movements can be expressed in the simple ratios of 3:1:4 (that is, extrapolated from 96:32:126). Through adopting these tempi, the performer will be able to create and communicate a sense of the underlying architecture of the whole work. Although the listener may not be consciously aware of an underlying consistency of pulse throughout the performance, its presence will be instinctively understood. The F major sonata is not an isolated example of an underlying metrical relationship underpinning Haydn's sonata structures. Almost all may have been conceived with an underlying *tactus* in mind, with the pulse of each movement in a simple mathematical ratio with the others in the sonata.<sup>4</sup>

Haydn's understanding of the possibilities of 'sonata form' was so complete that he constantly experimented with its potential for the creation of large-scale compositions having architectural unity. As an example we may examine the first movement of the C-sharp minor Sonata Hob. XVI:36, written about 1777. It has a classical, Bachian form, but the opening four bar statement contains all the thematic material required for the entire movement. First and second subject groups, transitions, development, recapitulation and coda all draw on this basic musical unit. It is a demonstration of Haydn's skill in the development of material that, at first glance, seems to have little potential. Seeing the way in which Haydn has written this monothematic sonata movement, while observing the rhetoric of classical sonata form, it is no surprise that he should have criticised his younger contemporaries for their lack of ability in developing their ideas.

Debate continues as to the 'correct' choice of instrument for the performance of Haydn's keyboard sonatas. Much has been written on the external evidence (indications in manuscript scores and published prints, comments in correspondence, inventories of instruments and surviving examples), and the evidence of autograph dynamic markings. These facts have been augmented by implications drawn from the expressive nature of the music. Despite this work, we can make no definitive statements as to appropriate instruments until we reach Haydn's

4 The application of this tempo ratio technique must remain speculative as it can be demonstrated only through methods that are subjective and dependent on a musician's personal response to a work, its inner construction and the appropriateness of the resulting *tempi*. It is undeniable that a unifying, underlying *tactus* existed in earlier, multi-sectional music, controlling metrical relationships within a work as a whole. That the technique had survived and was applied by some 18th century composers must remain a matter of personal opinion. I find the internal evidence compelling, but cannot prove the thesis. This is an argument that might be best demonstrated through the art of rhetoric, but doubt about the truth of this *propositio* must always remain!



later works. Without doubt, many purchasers of Haydn's sonatas in the 18th century would have owned harpsichords, clavichords and pianos, and would have played the works on the instruments available to them. We, however, wish to understand what instrument Haydn primarily conceived his keyboard works for, and the instrument he would prefer them to be played on.

His correspondence with Frau von Genzinger of 27th June 1790 makes two things clear: firstly, that he wished her to replace her harpsichord with a new 'Fortepiano' by the Viennese instrument maker [Wenzel] Schantz. Secondly, he makes it clear that he had not written for the harpsichord for many years:

Your Grace will, without doubt, have received the new Clavier sonata ... What a pity that Your Grace does not own a Fortepiano by Schanz since everything is expressed better on it. I think that Your Grace should give your still good Flügel to the Fraulein Peperl and buy a new Fortepiano for yourself. Your beautiful hands and the disciplined technique in them deserve this and still more. I know that I should have written this sonata for your type of Clavier, but it just was not possible, because I am not at all used to it any more.<sup>5</sup>

Haydn's use of two terms in this letter (*Flügel* – which in this case clearly means harpsichord, and *Clavier* to describe the same instrument) is unhelpful if we are attempting to establish a single definition for the term 'Clavier' which, when we refer to the second half of the 18th century, is usually now taken to indicate the clavichord. Both the above letter and the title page of the autograph of the sonata discussed in it (Hob. XVI:49 in E-flat Major) clearly demonstrate Haydn's adoption of the piano by 1790, although we also know that he continued to compose with the assistance of a clavichord until the end of his career.

The title pages of some of Haydn's earliest prints and manuscript copies use the term *cembalo* or *clavi-cembalo*. This is often a component of a title entirely in Italian and so may be taken as a generic term for a keyboard instrument rather than necessarily indicating a composition expressly for the harpsichord. Conclusions based on the use of this term on dated early prints may also be misleading, as many of these editions were prepared long after the composition of the works in question.

Inventories of instruments prepared during Haydn's years at Esterháza where many of his sonatas were written are incomplete. Based on surviving lists, there is no evidence that Haydn had access to a fortepiano there. Indeed, it must be remembered that although the piano first became known in Germany through the work of Gottfried Silbermann in the 1730s and '40s, the instrument did not become common in Germany and Austria until after Andreas Stein's invention of a new type of piano in the late 1770s and the introduction of these instruments to Vienna in the early 1780s. Even though the harpsichord must have

5 Trans: A. Peter Brown (cf. note 3).



remained in use throughout this whole period, the internal evidence of Haydn's keyboard music from about 1765 onwards demands an 'expressive' keyboard instrument capable of dynamic inflection. The clavichord is, without doubt, the likeliest candidate. We may therefore believe that Haydn's preferred keyboard instrument for the performance of his sonatas written before, say 1780, must be the clavichord.

In German-speaking nations, study of the clavichord had always been regarded as the foundation of good keyboard technique and a singing manner of playing. In considering exactly what a 'singing manner' of performance might mean, we should be aware that it does not necessarily mean the production of an unbroken, seamlessly sustained legato line of the 19th century *bel canto* tradition. Instead it should be taken to mean an inflected, articulated line, of the kind a singer with perfect diction can sustain, and so communicate the musical (and literary) content of the work. This approach casts the singer in the role of a rhetorician. The clavichord's immediate response to the touch of a gifted player makes it the ideal 'rhetorical' keyboard instrument, like a fine singer, capable of swaying the emotions and convincing an audience of the power of a rhetorical exposition. Haydn, as a master of musical rhetoric, is perhaps one of the greatest composers of clavichord music of the 18th century.<sup>6</sup>

6 For a detailed discussion and rhetorical analysis of a Haydn sonata, readers should consult Tom Beghin's essay "Haydn as Orator: A Rhetorical Analysis of His Keyboard Sonata in D Major, Hob. XVI:42" in *Haydn's World*, ed. Elaine Sisman, Princeton, 1997.