

HUMOR IN THE MUSICAL-DIDACTIC WORKS OF THE BAROQUE PERIOD

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Summary

Interest in musical treatises of past epochs is part of the interpretive process of performing early music according to the methodology of historically informed performance. We find in them information about performance practice and music theory of a certain historical time. The presentation of language in treatises also triggers our interest, especially in view of a comprehensive perception of aesthetics and worldview of artists of the baroque time. A feature of the baroque art is its division into high and low styles (high and low baroque). The expressive means of the lower baroque works contain elements of humour, irony and hyperbole. However, the same means can be seen in the works of high style. The object of coverage in the paper is a conscious use of elements of lower style by artists, in particular, the emphasis on the role of humour in musical-didactic treatises of the baroque period. This combination reflects the polarity and contrast of the baroque aesthetics. A take on music theory and performance practice through the prism of laughter and irony will help to identify another spectre of expressive means in the serious genres of baroque music and embody it in interpretation.

Keywords: baroque period, high and low baroque, humour, musical treatises, performance practice, historically informed performance.

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1. Introduction

The culture of the baroque period is special for its contrast, combination of the spiritual and the sublime with the mundane and the material. This polarity manifested itself in artistic genres, the diversity of which is represented by both high style and lower baroque. Humorous, ironic or simply exaggerated perception of reality in the works of art is not only intrinsic to works of the lower baroque, but is also characteristic of the genres of the high baroque. Elements of humour or frivolous expression are skilfully woven and sometimes might be overlooked.

The high style of Ukrainian musical baroque is represented by partes music – choral concerts for 8-12 voices. Partes works are characterized by a wide choral range (distance from the lowest to the highest sound of all voices of the choir), variety of choral texture (combination of homophonic and polyphonic fragments, alternation of solo and ensemble periods with singing of the whole choir) and significant virtuosity of melodic lines. Elements of the penetration of lower culture into works on spiritual themes were the use of dance rhythms and some folk songs intonations in individual episodes of partes concerts.

The way of performing ancient music, in particular of the baroque period, requires a different approach to the reproduction of the text, the manner of singing and, in general, a comprehensive interpretation of music. The performance of early music with a special method of its interpretation represents the movement of historically informed performance. This is a musical-performing initiative aimed at reproducing early music as it sounded originally, as it

was conceived by composers and implemented by musicians of that time. In order to get at least an approximate “authentic” result, musicians look for clues in the musical treatises of that era.

When we explore the performance practice of the baroque period, study the music-theoretical works of that time, we also consider the way musicians present instructions and preferences. The expression of artists of the 17-18th centuries combines features of high and low style, which are manifested in the description of the divine origin of musical art, characterization of music as an instrument of ennoblement of souls, thorough presentation of music theory, terminology, description of aesthetic performance, good taste, but at the same time also contained elements of humour, satirized drawbacks of performing practice, an exaggerated description of the mistakes of singers. The combination of elements of high and low style concerns not only genre and content, or means of expression, it also reflects the very way of thinking of artists of that time, which is clearly traced in the musical-didactic works of the baroque period.

Humour, as an integral element and didactic mean of musical treatises of the baroque time, is for the first time the object of musicological research. Considering a piece of music from the point of view of historically informed interpretation, performance decisions are made by analogy or even intuitively, due to lack of information, or inconsistency of instructions in different treatises. Those fragments of treatises that describe incorrect, inappropriate performance can also enrich our emotional perception of baroque music, as well as knowledge about the attitude to the music-making process at that time. The research methodology consists of the analysis and comparison of musical treatises, emotional accents, which are put by their authors on musical technique, musical taste, performing skills or characteristics of their contemporary performing practice, in particular its drawbacks. The aim of this paper is to highlight the polarity of the image of the baroque musician, high demands on his intelligence, emotionality, professional excellence, and at the same time the reality of musical practice of the time, which was wittily and sometimes sharply presented by the authors of treatises.

2. On The Art of Singing by Christoph Bernhard

The work of the German musician Christoph Bernhard was written in the 1650s. The author described three styles of singing in performance at the time: *cantar sodo* – simple singing, *d'affetto* – affected, and *cantar passagiato* – coloratura singing. He singled out the connection between the word and music and the corresponding reflection of this synthesis in the performance as one of the most important tasks of the singer. Each of the singing styles had its own arsenal of expressive means or musical ornaments. Among the ornaments of simple singing, the musician also included dynamic signs *piano and forte*, which could relate to different words, syllables, or even the same sound. He considered the *d'affetto* style to be typical of only vocal music (solo or choral), as its feature was to adjust the sounding according to the text. That is, in the absence of words, this singing was impossible.

He recommended the soloist to work with the verbal text in two planes: on the pronunciation of words (diction and articulation), and on the embodiment of their semantic content. Verbal-musical structures, accordingly performed, express various affects, emotional states, mood of the work. For each of them, the musician selects the appropriate characteristics of the sound: strong, valiant, hearty, mild. He distinguishes the affects that the performer must reproduce by pausing or accelerating the tempo, and those embodied by sound techniques. He noted that some affects allow the musician to improvise ornaments, while others require only the just performance of the score.

On the other hand, Christoph Bernhard sharply criticizes singers with exaggerated facial expressions, considers it unnecessary to use theatrical gestures when singing, and recommends “hiding” such performers farther on the scene from the audience. Contempt for excessive mimics can be seen in the humour of the composer's instructions. The number of selected examples of wrong facial expressions indicates the author's true indignation: the singer should “... nor stretch his tongue out over his lips, nor thrust his lips upward, nor distort his mouth, nor disfigure his cheeks and nose like the long-tailed monkey, nor crumple his eyebrows together, nor wrinkle his forehead, nor roll his head or the eyes therein round and round, nor wink with the same, nor tremble with his lips, etc.” (*Hilse, 1973:25*). Such specific visual image of all described shortcomings causes a smile and even seems improbable for the modern reader. The principle of hypertrophy of reality through exaggeration of ridiculous is one of the means of literary and musical genres of the lower baroque.

3. Musical treatises by Thomas Campion, Anselm Bayly and William Turner

Thomas Campion's musical treatise on the art of composition of 1655 is interesting for the discussion set out at the end of the work. It is described as a dispute between doctors of music in Oxford, which took place in 1622. The musician's work is a statement of the rules of composition, explanation of the principles of counterpoint, musical scale, names of notes and their durations, the concepts of intervals, mode and key, perfect and imperfect harmonies. Apparently, the work was a kind of thesis of the author to obtain a title in this academic community. The last question to the author was what he considered more important – music theory or music practice (the question relevant for the 17th century musical culture, the time when the role of practical music had shifted). Thomas Campion emphasized that music is both an art and a science. As a science, music also uses knowledge of arithmetic, geometry and musical proportions. The highest distinction of music as an art is that at that time (the time of the discussion – 1622) among all the liberal arts, the degree of Doctor was given only to musicians (*Campion, 1655*). Thus, humour was also a component of oral professional communication and music-theoretical scientific debates.

The work of the British musician William Turner was published in 1734 under the title “Sound anatomiz'd in a Philosophical Essay on Musick”. The author described in detail the problems of musical intonation, purity and clarity of sound. Several paragraphs were devoted to the characteristics of concords, consonances and dissonances, their role, aesthetics and expressive nature of music. When he gives instructions for good performance, in order to emphasize the conscious interpretation of the text by the singer, his musical-theoretical qualification and understanding of music, he uses irony and comparison: “like some singers, who are extremely fond of being heard to rattle in the Throat, though at the same Time, they banter both Musician and the Poet, having regard to neither Sounds, nor Words, like a clumsy Painter, that casts false shades to every Thing he draws” (*Turner, 1734:4*).

Anselm Bayly published his work in 1771. It sets out the author's reflections on the grammatical structures of the verbal text, the correct formation of vowels and consonants in recitation, punctuation marks in the text and their reproduction by pauses of varying duration in speech or singing. He adds a description of musical embellishments and instructions for their use. He focuses readers' attention on the peculiarity of sacred music, because only it can really change people's hearts, calm passions and express various feelings. But when he describes a

church singer as “a man of improved understanding, refine taste and good manners”, he also adds: “it is wished may meet with distinguished reward in the church, such as may make him superior to the necessity of following the trade, and the temptation of desecrating sacred music by profane” (*Bayly, 1771:99*). Reminders about the reward, material values and human needs are also a feature of culture of the lower baroque, which transfers the high, spiritual to the material and physical plane (*Isichenko, 2011; Semeniuk, 2019*).

When Anselm Bayly gives advice to the singing teacher, he pays special attention to sound production, voice leading, uniformity of sound in the whole range, emphasizes the differences of breathing for upper and lower tones. Musician also advises to develop personal traits, such as honesty and diligence, and achieve gracefulness, poses and gestures appropriate to the content of music. He uses the humorous dialogue of two spectators to convey the public's perception of the performer not only by ear, but also visually: “A great lover of sacred music after hearing, or rather seeing an anthem sung wittily remarked “I should judge the person who sung the bass to be a barber”. Why asks another? Because, says he, the man tossed his head about, and curled his notes so much!” (*Bayly, 1771:42*).

4. Music publications of Italian musicians Benedetto Marcello and Francesco Geminiani

Benedetto Marcello's satirical pamphlet on the Italian opera “*Il teatro alla moda*” of 1720 is the author's recommendation to all those involved in the production of the opera: from the poet, composer and singers to costume and set designers, scene workers, page-boys and everyone at least somehow related to theatre. The work is well known, it is often interpreted as an ironic presentation of contemporary musical practice. If all the author's instructions are understood on the contrary, then we see a deep consideration of knowledge and skills, stylistic and professional guidelines that are necessary for the production of the opera. This work embodies the reverse transformation of low to high, humorous to serious.

For instance, the text-characteristics of a contemporary composer: “He will not understand the numerical proportions of music, or the excellent effect of contrary movements, or the false relation of the triton or major sixth. He will not know the names and number of the modes or tones, or how they are classified, or what are their properties... He will not distinguish one from another the three genera: diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic, but will confound at his whim the progressions of all three” (*Strunk, 1965: 165*). If we take away the particle “not”, we get a list of necessary knowledge and skills for a composer of the baroque period. We can also learn instructions on the libretto, advice for singers and musicians of the orchestra.

Francesco Geminiani's work on the art of music and musical taste, published in 1769, contains such interpretation of good taste – to sing with taste means express either with force, or delicacy the idea of the composer (*Geminiani, 1769:2*). The musician describes the musical ornaments and characterizes each of them as to how to perform it, what emotions they express, when it is appropriate to use them. He considers the acquisition of singing skills and the formation of good musical taste to be an easy science, and perhaps remembering one of his own students, describes stubbornness as the main obstacle to learning: “it may be easily obtained by any Person, who is not too fond of his own Opinion, and doth not obstinately resist the Force of true Evidence” (*Geminiani, 1769:2*).

5. Mykola Dyletskyj's treatise Musical Grammar

Mykola Dyletskyj's Musical Grammar was written by him in Vilnius in 1675, but it has not been found, so we learn about the content of the treatise from later editions of its Smolensk version. In this work the composer lays out the basics of music theory and composition, describes the process of musical learning and formation of different choral voices (trebles, altos, basses, tenors). He for the first time explains the “circle of fifths” and principles of mode-tonal variability and transposition, provides instructions for performing musical works and examples of different types of choral disposition for young composers. To encourage them to learn, and to emphasize diligence in study, he weaves comparison and folk sayings into the text: «Do not resist like a goat and do not be ashamed to learn, because it is not a shame to learn, the worst shame is not to be able to do anything [Не упирайся як коза і не встидайся учиться, бо гди ж не есть встид учиться, встид горший нічого не уміть]» (*Tsalai-Yakymenko, 1910*).

The interpenetration of high and low, secular and sacred was part of the compositional process, in particular the imposition of secular text on spiritual music, or vice versa. Judging by the description of such a phenomenon by Mykola Dyletskyj in his Grammar, it was the usual practice of composing: «play either a mass, or a vesper, or any concert, and let the other one sing the text which he wants, let it be sacred, or secular, and not only one, may even one hundred musicians do it [Грай албо ли мшу, албо ли нешпор, албо який-нибудь концерт, а другий нехай співає текст який хоче, хоть косцьольний, хоть свіцький, не тільки еден, хочай і сто музикантов]» (*Tsalai-Yakymenko, 1970:69*). To emphasize the effect of incorrect disposition of melodic material between voices, he uses vivid figurative comparisons that create expressive auditory associations in the reader. For example, explaining that at certain vowels one should not use movement of small durations in the bass, he writes: «Be careful not to apply the fugue on the letters U and E, especially in the bass, because he howls in a rough voice like a wolf in such a fantasy [На тую літеру У і І фуґи барзо ся вистеріґай покладать, а особливо в басі, бо грубим голосом зависє, аки волк в такой фантазії]» (*Tsalai-Yakymenko, 1970:45*). By using the term “fugue”, the composer means the direct meaning of the word – “running”, i.e. melodic development of short durations. The composer's use of comparisons to a goat or a wolf was also due to the original purpose of the Grammar to educate not only young composers but also singers of partes works, where parts of trebles and altos were performed by children (little boys).

6. Conclusion

Humour is a special device of rhetoric of musical treatises of the baroque period. The use of jokes, irony and satire was primarily due to the desire to make musical rules simple and accessible to students. What is more, with the help of humour, the authors of the treatises could pinpoint the shortcomings of the contemporary performing practice. Ridiculing was often used to criticize the excess of manners, exaggerated gestures, inappropriate facial expressions, or the overuse of improvised embellishments. By exaggeration and comparison, musicians revealed examples of ignorance and youth unwillingness to learn. Jokes woven into serious theoretical explanation were often also deliberately used by composers as an attempt to defuse the tension (for example, in the middle of a scientific debate), or to soften criticism of reality or expressions of dissatisfaction (as in a request for a reward).

Humour in musical treatises is not only a manifestation of the intertwining of stylistic features of high and low baroque, adaptation of complex theoretical material for educational purposes and different audiences, but also a clever way to express dissatisfaction, light criticism or remarks about contemporary practice of music performance. The way of combining the serious and the humorous reflected the style of expression and the very thinking of the artists of the baroque era. Accordingly, the awareness of this unity will allow us to more deeply interpret the various emotional shades of the high partes style and to diversify performing means of expression of their embodiment.

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