

Liszt Academy of Music  
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J. S. Bach and two cultures of music

PhD Theses

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## 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

It would seem that as far as the literature of music theory is concerned, the history of musical form began in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Explicit thinking regarding musical form, which also appears in theoretical treatises, does indeed relate to the end of that century, largely to the most significant theorist of the period following Mozart's death, Heinrich Christoph Koch. The sporadic earlier references to the question of arrangement of the musical material also suggest that musical form in the modern sense was not a decisive compositional consideration before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to this paradigm, the formal arrangement characterising a given work is not the result of a pre-existing concept, but is determined either by a non-musical factor, such as the construction of the text – as in a vocal work – or develops as it were by itself as a result of other parameters, for example various modulations – as in a movement of a concerto. This model is actually valid regarding the bulk of the compositions of the baroque era. However, an analysis of a number of works by J.S. Bach suggests that in some cases the ordering of the musical ideas in time played a decisive role in the course of composition.

Thus, one of the motives for writing this dissertation was the contradiction between the absence of theoretical texts regarding form from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and the high degree of organisation of Bach's works. The other motive was the wide-ranging consensus in contemporary musicology, according to which the most important role in compositional thinking in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was played by the invention of musical ideas, in rhetorical terms by the *inventio*, whereas the arrangement of the musical material, the *dispositio*, was merely a secondary matter. The purpose of my dissertation – in the simplest possible terms – was to demonstrate that in the case of Bach, *dispositio* and *inventio* were at times of equal importance in the course of composing, that is, the concept of characteristic musical form existed even before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and played an important part in compositional thinking.

It is largely due to the influential work by Laurence Dreyfus (*Bach and the patterns of invention*, 1996) that in the Anglo-Saxon Bach analysis of the past decade and a half *inventio* has become the central category. Karol Berger, whose book (*Bach's cycle, Mozart's arrow*, 2008) is, besides Dreyfus's, the other chief source of inspiration for my work, built his own very exciting, though highly debatable, musical history model and theory of time in part on Dreyfus's analytic method. Berger's interest focused on the temporal character of music, or more precisely on the transformation in the course of which, sometime during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, between Bach and Mozart, musical form became primarily temporal and musicians increasingly came to focus on the temporal arrangement of the musical events. The two protagonists of his theory represent two different concepts of

time: the polyphonic music of Bach represents the cyclical, the music of Mozart based on the sonata-principle the linear concept of time.

Berger (and Dreyfus) looks upon Bach not as a romantic genius, but as an inventive scholar discoverer, who searched for the possibilities inherent in the musical themes, or complexes of themes, which he used as his rough material, and which were often not his inventions but provided for him by the tradition. According to this model, a Bach work is essentially using the possibilities inherent in a given theme serving as the basis for the composition, running it through various compositional mechanisms, and the musical form of a certain movement is secondary to Bach's work on the themes. The other main actor of Berger's theory, Mozart, on the other hand, represents that thinking about form where the temporal order of the musical events is more important than the mechanical potential inherent in the themes.

Though Berger's book is highly reflective and on many points strongly diverges – or attempts to diverge – from the outlook of 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic musical history writing, I felt I discovered in his theory of form the outlines of a conception of form dating back to a hundred years earlier. One of the most important representatives of the German tradition of the theory absolute music, August Halm, in his book written in 1913 (*Von zwei Kulturen der Musik*, 1913) distinguished the two cultures in music in a way which from various aspects resembles Berger's approach. He took the two central categories of his theory from Eduard Hanslick: these are theme and form, which, in line with Hegel's historical dialectic, are the antitheses of each other. Bach's fugues represent the "culture of theme", whereas Beethoven's sonatas the "culture of form".

The theory of Halm and Berger gives a very vivid representation of the dual character of the form of the music written in the idiom of the major-minor tonality: the construction from small elements on the one hand, and the process character on the other. This duality, however, is not exclusive, and the two poles of the dichotomy cannot be separated along periods in musical history or along paradigms. The "culture" of theme and form, or the cyclical and linear concept of time, can be distinguished within the work of a single composer, and though I focused on the work of Bach, this duality is probably characteristic also as regards the music of Beethoven or Mozart, and is also generally valid when it comes to compositions within the tradition of the major-minor tonality.

My work is intended to be more than merely a rebuttal of the theoretical models of two significant music historians. My purpose is to grasp, on the basis of the sporadic remarks concerning form in 18<sup>th</sup> century theoretical texts, the concept of musical form at the time of Bach, and to examine how far this accords with the

compositional logic characterising Bach's works, and how it relates to the later theories of the two cultures of form.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

My dissertation is a series of parallel dialogues between 17–18<sup>th</sup> century music theory texts, certain elements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bach literature, current theories in musicology, and my analyses of Bach pieces. Since the analysis of works occupies a central place in my dissertation, I found it important to discuss how far one can speak, in the case of Bach of works of art in the modern sense. As my point of departure I took one of the provocative thesis-sentences of Lydia Goehr's highly controversial book (*The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, 1992) according to which it was not Bach's intention to compose musical works of art. I approached the question from the aspect of Bach's reception around 1800. It was at that time that the concept of the modern work of art arose in German aesthetic thought. Moreover, it did so in connection with the growing aesthetic significance of instrumental music; and this latter occurred in parallel with the rediscovery of Bach's music. The possible connection between Bach and the concept of a work of art also led back to the German *musica poetica* tradition, in which the concept of *opus absolutum et perfectum* arose, whose late representative, seemingly, was Bach. In order to map out Bach's concept of a work of art, I examined the contemporary linguistic usage, the formulations on the covers of Bach's autographs, as well as other documents, and the aesthetic debate that took place in the middle third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which indirectly Bach also took part, one of whose important issues was the relations between the intellect and the senses.

Of the attempts to grasp musical form, I paid particular attention to the rhetorical approach, since this was the most generally used metaphor with which the theoretical texts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century endeavoured to describe musical form. I surveyed the approach taken by the theoreticians of the German baroque tradition, from Gallus Dressler through Joachim Burmeister to Johann Mattheson, to the question of *dispositio*, the arrangement of musical thoughts, and argued that in the case of musical form the rhetorical analogy raises more questions than it answers. This is also indicated by the debate between Mattheson and Lorenz Mizler between 1737 and 1742, brought about by Mattheson's famous analysis of a Marcello aria.

In the analytic chapters of my dissertation I bring into play two further metaphors in connection with musical form: the metaphors of time and space. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were two rival concepts of time in philosophical thinking, and these can be made to correspond perfectly to the "two cultures" of musical form. According to Newton's concept of time, which is often

referred to as the substantialist position, time is an independently existing structure, possessing its own characteristics, separate from the things “in it”, which it contains like some sort of vessel. As against this, Leibniz, who is regarded as the most important representative of the relationist concept of time, believed that every statement regarding time can be reduced to the temporal relations of things and events. According to the latter, therefore, time is a relational concept that can be reduced to the temporal relations of material objects, events or mental processes. If we substitute in this description “musical form” for “time”, and “musical events” for “events” in the world, then we are faced with the two cultures of musical form discussed by Halm and Berger, which I demonstrated in my dissertation through examples of Bach’s prelude, fugue and concerto.

In the first case the musical form exists in itself, independently from the musical events taking place within it, containing them as some sort of vessel. As examples of this I analyse the opening movement of the E major violin concerto (BWV 1042), the C major prelude (BWV 870) and the E flat major and F sharp major fugues (BWV 852 and 882) from the second part of the *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*. In the other case the form is “relative”, inasmuch as it does not exist in itself, but is determined by the temporal relations of the musical events. In my dissertation this is exemplified by the early version of the above mentioned C major prelude (BWV 870a) and the opening movement of Vivaldi’s E major violin concerto (RV 256).

In the closing chapter of my dissertation I employed the metaphor of architecture in connection with Bach’s compositions, since, besides rhetoric, this is the most generally used framework within which the 18<sup>th</sup> century music theory texts examine musical form. I looked at the concept of symmetry – in contemporary usage eurhythmy – and at particular Bach pieces possessing “architectonic” symmetry. The attraction towards precise symmetry, measurable in the number of beats, is characteristic of Bach’s musical thinking: this is reflected in the fact that, compared to the most significant keyboard composers of the age (Couperin, Rameau, Handel and Graupner), in his dance movements we find far more pieces in which the two members of a binary form are of precisely the same length. The importance of symmetry is also reflected in the large number of movements possessing the *da capo* form in Bach’s work, what is more, not only in the arias but also in the instrumental pieces.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

I did not attempt in my dissertation to create a comprehensive theorem of the baroque form. Beyond the fact that I would hardly have been able to do it, I could not see the point of doing so either, since the musical thinking of the period resists all unifying endeavours. My goal was rather to use the passages of the contemporary theoretical works relating to form and to different genres to establish the conceptual framework, or rather frameworks, which would help to understand the compositional logic behind the form of specific compositions. From various aspects Halm's, or even Berger's theory, provide excellent tools for the understanding of musical processes. What appears to me invalid in their theory is the aim for comprehensiveness, since, in my experience, the complexity of Bach's musical thinking cannot be grasped with the help of a single model.

In the first chapter I discussed the 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of art work and endeavoured to demonstrate that, in the case of a musical work of art, it is impossible to describe the thinking of the period, or even of a single composer, with a single theory of general validity. This is because while it is true that at that time the overwhelming majority of musical works came about not as autonomous works of art but in connection with an occasion, function or activity – and also that if a musical product came about which we can regard as a work of art, this was primarily a consequence of social and political circumstances – nevertheless in some cases Bach created works of art in the modern sense of that term. In the second chapter I demonstrated, beyond the connection between the theories of Halm and Berger, the problematic character of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century rhetorical interpretations of musical form, on the basis of the contemporary theoretical works (Dressler, Burmeister, Herbst, Mattheson, Walther, Mizler). This can be traced back largely to the differences between music and language. At the same time I pointed out that having an education in rhetoric was not characteristic of the composers of the period; indirect evidence strongly suggests that this is true as regards Bach as well. In the third chapter I depicted the two cultures of the form in action, proving by way of analyses that that both are present in the genres of the prelude, fugue and concerto. In the closing chapter I discussed four questions: the architectural metaphor applied to musical form, the concept of musical symmetry, Bach's fondness for symmetrical structures (in dance movements, complete cantatas, instrumental movements and in arias), and the connection between the musical form and the text. In connection with the last of these, I attempted to show that, at the time of Bach, the construction of a vocal movement (chorus or aria) was primarily a musical matter and was not determined by the structure of the text. Finally, by way of an analysis of the *Goldberg variations*, I wished to demonstrate how these varied approaches can be deployed on a single work of art, albeit one that can be regarded as one of the most complex pieces of the period.

## 4. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- „Egy arabeszkfogalom és zenei konzekvenciái. Dallamformálás és polifónia Debussy zenéjében”.(An arabesque concept and its musical consequences. The formation of melody and polyphony in Debussy’s music) *Magyar Zene* 45 (2007)/2, 143–181.
- „Beteges és csúnya művészet, vagy magasabb rendű művészet felé mutató iránytű? Debussy fogadtatása Magyarországon (1900–1918)”. (‘Unhealthy’ and ‘ugly’ music, or a ‘Compass pointing towards a purer art of superior quality?’ The early reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900-1918)) *Magyar Zene* 46 (2008)/2, 139–154.
- „‘Unhealthy’ and ‘Ugly’ Music or a ‘Compass Pointing Towards a Purer Art of Superior Quality’? The Early Reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900–1918)”. *Studia Musicologica* 49 (2008)/3–4, 1–19.
- „A variáció mint formai reflexió. A *Goldberg-variációk* és a zenei forma”.(The variations as formal reflections. The Goldberg variations and musical form) *Magyar Zene* 46 (2008)/4, 353–366.
- „Musique laide et malsaine ou boussole indiquant un art plus pur de qualité supérieure? Les premiers temps de la réception de Debussy en Hongrie (1900-1918)”. *Cahiers Debussy* 33 (2009), 33–50.
- „Inventio vs. dispositio. A bachi fúga és a zenei forma”. (Inventio vs. dispositio. Bach’s fugue and musical form) *Magyar Zene* 47 (2009)/2, 147–161.
- „Improvizatív és tervezett zenei forma. Szabályok és stratégiák Vivaldi és J. S. Bach koncertóiban”. Improvisative and planned musical form. Rules and strategies in the concertos of Vivaldi and J. S. Bach) *Magyar Zene* 47 (2009)/3, 223–238.
- „Euritmia, azaz Wohlgeremheit: szimmetrikus struktúrák Johann Sebastian Bachnál”. (Eurhythmia, that is, Wohlgeremheit: symmetrical structures in the case of Johann Sebastian Bach) *Magyar Zene* 48 (2010)/4, 5–18.