From Aristotle to Newton – philosophy of time and the music of baroque

Performance notes
Program:

Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643)

Toccata Settima in d (Toccate e Partite d'intavolatura di cimbalo. Libro I, Rome 1615)

Aria detta la Frescobalda (Toccate e partite d'intavolatura di cimbalo. Libro II, Rome 1637)

Louis Couperin (1626-1661)

Prelude in a

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Suite a-moll BWV 818a

Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (1601-1672) Pieces in a

Fort gay (Bach)

Allemande (Bach)

Courante – Courante avec double (Chambonnières)

Courante (Chambonnières) – Courante (Bach)

Gaillarde (Chambonnières)

Sarabande (Chambonnières) – Sarabande (Bach)

Menuet (Bach)

[Requirements: double manual harpsichord 8'+8'+4']

Numerous handbooks of the 20th century that deal with the performance of the baroque music, have established a common approach to tackle time-related issues of that very musical style. "How fast?" is a question brought up in several writings dealing with the performance of pre-Bach music. 'Historically correct' answers, developed via modern prism and with the help of post-Bach technology, i. e. metronome, can be misleading or even inapplicable in today's historically informed performance practice.

Revising the 20th century sources critically and creating new knowledge through re-interpreting treatises and score material of the 17th-18th century has been one of the goals of my PhD research. While doing so I have come to doubt if the question "how fast?" in the context of performing baroque music has ever been the right question to ask. Let me illustrate. In his "Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen" (1752), Johann Joachim Quantz is implying to a Pulsschlagtheorie (heartbeat theory) in which he states that the easiest way to measure time (Zeitmaaß) in the performance of music is to use the pulse on a hand of a healthy man. This rather vague and subjective hint of an 18th century musical practitioner translated into today's knowledge would allow us to state that anything between 60-100 bpM, depending on the physical and emotional appearance of a specific person, would be equally applicable, acceptable and tolerable, i. e. 'correct'. However, in 20th century writings, an arithmetic mean (60+100)/2=80bpM of those two limit values has been calculated in order to facilitate further investigation of 'correct' tempi. Investigations of which the outcomes are presented in metronomic

tempo value charts disregard the fact that the metronome wasn't introduced to practical music making until around 1826, that is the time of L. van Beethoven and his 9th symphony – correct and authentic? Perhaps (arithmetically) correct but not historically authentic.

Using the arithmetic mean value in constructing those metronome charts can lead to dubious conclusions, when not absurdities. Based on the average of 80bpM, Hans-Peter Schmilz in his book "Quantz heute. Der „Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen" (1987) calculates as much as 160bpM as a tempo for a minuet. He explains that the tempi of Quantz' time are too fast for modern pursuit as baroque instruments differ from modern ones, thus easier to play fast. Another German author, Paul Heuser, comes to following conclusion: „Quantz' Pulsschlagtehorie is problematic in the performance […] and it can only by applied for moderate or slow pieces". One of the most thorough 20th century sources on baroque tempi is Klaus Miehling's „Das Tempo in der Musik von Barock und Vorklassik" (1993). On nearly 400 pages Miehling offers metronomic tempo calculations and explanations to a large variety of baroque repertoire. It is only in the self-reflcting Epilogue of his book, titled „Historische Tempi – heute noch zeitgemäß?", where Miehling poses a question whether his calculations only serve the interests of historical-musiclogical correctness or should they actually be made applicable for the musicians, i. e. seen in context of various parameters of performance practice.

Coming back to the negation of the research question „how fast?" I would like to propose another question instead - does historically informed performance need to be 'correct' or rather capturing and beautiful instead? I think the answer is clear. In my PhD research I am seeking to define compositional elements that, when approached through other than metronomic perspective, contribute to a more elaborate outcome.
However, instead of demonstrating isolated temporal events and their implementation in interpretation of the 17th-18th century music, I would today like to evoke your attention on the framework behind it. That is, the switch from Aristotelian time philosophy to the Newtonian one, and the manifestation of that switch in music.
Aristotle defined time through motion - change in the appearance of circumstances, movement from A to B is an evidence of the existence of time. It was somewhere in the second half of the 17th century when, after heavy disputes in the educated society, Aristotelian philosophy of time was slowly replaced by Newtonian idea of independently flowing absolute time.

In the treatises of the late 16th-early 17th century, musical time was explained through the term *tactus*, defined as up-and-down motion of a human hand. Such motion of a hand contains arrival points (up and down) and motion between those points, thus it clearly reflects the Aristotelian way of thinking in music. It appears to me that the Aristotelian idea of time – motion with rests in between – is reflecting also on the music written in the first half of the 17th century. As heard in the Toccata by Girolamo Frescobaldi, a relatively short piece (6-7min) is divided into subsections of which some could be left out by the player without affecting the entity of the piece. Moreover, Frescobaldi even suggests the player to do so. Likewise, Frescobaldi states that the different sections must be varied in tempo, according to the affect or character of the music. Here's a connection to the heartbeat theory by Quantz – depending on the emotional state of a person, the pulse may and must vary in relation to the subjective *tactus*.

In 1771 Johann Kirnberger („Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik"), when explaining the musical time, is asking the reader to imagine beats of equal weight and distance. Continuous flow and the completedness of a musical material within one (dance) piece would not allow the player any (even theoretical) elimination of musical material of any 18th century piece, be it Johann Sebastian Bach or any of the Frenchmen. Likewise, change of tempo within one piece would not be plausible. Here the

rhetorical timing of single compositional events (figures) will contribute to an elaborate interpretation. Kirnberger's idea of equally and independently in time flowing beats let us assume that by the time of Bach, the Newtonian way of thinking had established itself in music.

Between 1722 and 1725, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote the six Harpsichords Suites BWV 812-817, *Suittes pour le Clavessin,* that he dedicated to his second wife Anna Magdalena. In contemporary editions like Neue Bach-Ausgabe, an additional Suite in A-Minor BWV 818 (1722) has been included to the compilation of those harpsichord pieces that are now commonly known as the French Suites. It is also known that it wasn't the composer himself who titled his harpsichord pieces as "French", but the name was given later. According to J. N. Forkel, "One usually calls them French Suites because they are written in the French manner" ("Man nennt sie gewöhnlich Französische Suiten, weil sie im Französischen Geschmack geschrieben sind" – Forkel).
Encouraged by the thoughts of celebrated early music scholar Bruce Haynes, I have allowed myself to take a different role in this concert as merely an "executioner" of the score. By juxtaposing the dances from Suite in a-minor BWV 818a with the dances by Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (1601-1672), one of the earliest remaining source of the French harpsichord music, I have created a brand new suite to illustrate the transitions between styles and thinking.

Audio Examples: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1duKMD-LIbUsNgKSKGu3LfswhG0F0VqO_?usp=sharing

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Saale Fischer (1979) is an Estonian harpsichordist, music educator and author.

After graduating from Tallinn Technical University, she furthered her studies in early music and historical keyboard instruments at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and at the Musikhochschule Trossingen in Germany.

Since 2007, Saale Fischer has primarily worked as a freelance harpsichordist, both as a soloist and a continuo-player in Estonia and Germany. Additionally, she has spent two years working in Cairo (Egypt).

After returning to her native country, she co-founded baroque ensemble Floridante (2014). Having taken a mission to improve audience awareness of early repertoire in Estonia, Floridante has performed music from Monteverdi to Mozart, and undertaken the undiscovered lied-repertoire of the 19th century Baltic-German composers residing in Estonia.

Saale Fischer is the author of the book „My Cairo“ (Petrone Print, 2014), and a co-editor of „The Contemporary Harpsichordist“ (Bellmann Musik, 2014). Her current engagements include music education and event management.