Musica poetica – aesthesica musica

The Theory of Baroque Musical Rhetoric as an aesthetic trace

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1. Introduction

This paper will examine the Theory of Baroque Musical Rhetoric (TBMR), the *Musica Poetica*, from the perspective of musical reception, i.e., aesthetic processes. Although *Musica Poetica* was originally conceived as a compositional theory, its epistemic bases and its *modus operandi* lead us to reconsider its operativity in the study of strategies of reception or verbalisation of the musical experience. The aim of the reflections of this paper is to create the conceptual framework which supports the formulation of an aesthetic analysis methodology based on TBMR. The intention is to try to propose this analytical methodology in subsequent studies.

2. Theory of Baroque Musical Rhetoric and esthesis

Joachim Burmeister, the first great systematiser and influential initiator of the tradition of TBMR, is the only theorist to mention the aesthetic potential of this theory. According to Bartel, in the prologue to his *Musica autoschediastike* (1601) Burmeister states that "similarly, these established forms would provide the listeners with terms for practically all musical devices" (cited in Bartel, 1997: 94-5).

But it is necessary to go beyond Burmeister’s explicit aesthetic *intentio auctoris*. It should be remembered that a musical theory, although it does not propose aesthetic objectives, may also display receptive practices which, until that moment, remained latent, confused in a complex framework of behaviours and strategies of different kinds. In fact, the diachronic development of the relations between poiesis and esthesis suggests that the receptive strategies in effect at a particular moment are often integrated in the complex of poietic devices of the following period (cf. Nattiez, 1990: 146-7 and 180-1). In this regard, *Musica poetica* may be considered as the emergence, in the form of a compositional doctrine, of receptive behaviours practised implicitly beforehand.

This hypothesis needs to be examined in light of the historical sources of the 17th and 18th centuries, especially those which document opinions of
musical receptors, real or potential, which show the connection between rhetorical principles and the listener. These historical sources can be divided into three classes: 1) books on other types of contemporary musical theory, such as *Musica Theorica* and *Musica Practica*; 1 2) testimonies from non-musical sources. A particularly interesting case is that of the documents prepared by a group of English writers and philosophers which coincide with the rhetorical-musical appreciations of *Musica poetica* 2 and 3) artistic theories in fields other than music which also used rhetorical categories. In all these cases, it is essential to analyse the way in which the use of the rhetorical apparatus as an explanatory device may become a strategy for comprehension, while "explanation and comprehension are merely different phases of the same hermeneutic process" (Paul Ricoeur *dixit*).

At a first glance, it can be stated that the explanation and comprehension of musical phenomena by means of the rhetorical apparatus was not a practice exclusive to a theoretical school or tradition. It was also the recurring attitude of a sector of music lovers with more or less extensive knowledge of both music and rhetoric. One hypothesis is that this connection came about from specific receptive experiences where musical and literary experiences became intertwined by means of a prestigious, institutionalised discipline integrated within the horizons of expectations of every reasonably well educated person of the time.

The subject which interests us in this paper is how TBMR, once formulated, was able to integrate itself with the receptive strategies and musical competences of a considerable group of listeners of the Baroque period. We will examine this possibility based on the analysis of the intrinsic characteristics of the system itself. For the moment, historical considerations will not be taken into account.
3. Relations between metalanguage and object language

Firstly, we will once again underline (cf. López Cano, 1998) that rhetoric is a theoretical (or metatheoretical) device expressed by means of a metalinguistic discourse. That is, the rhetorical framework is a reality which is external to the textual framework itself. It is a device for regulating extratextual actions (Fig. 1).

We know that the continuous use of a metalanguage ends up having a certain influence on the basic ideas which we have regarding its object language. The connections between both epistemological spheres are characterised by a fluid and constant exchange of semiotic charges. This is much more obvious in the case of musical metalanguages and especially rhetoric (Fig. 2).
In this regard, it is helpful to consider the research on the processes of verbalisation of music carried out by Michel Imberti (1975, 1979) from the field of experimental psychology. According to this author, when verbalising the musical experience, large bands of the semantic spectrum of this experience cannot be reached by language: they resist it. Language, in turn, imprints new semantic marks which do not necessarily underlie the experience but come from the same semantic thickness of the words used. This semiotic transaction is inevitable and emerges whenever we attempt to apprehend the meaning of one symbolic form through another. Hence, we have two cases: 1) the rhetorical artifice, as an institutionalised metalanguage, does not contemplate all possible cases of receptive activity which can be inserted in it and 2) once explicitly learned, its categories lead the listener to carry out specific operations which he or she did not perform previously.

There is a certain logocentrism according to which the perceptive qualities depend on the level of specificity of the pre-existing vocabulary which could describe them. Thus the application and continuous use of a terminology would have a determining influence on the structuring habits of the receptor. The language breaks down the continuum of the perceptive experience into discrete pertinent units according to the elements which the lexicon recognises. This is precisely what Michael Baxandall (1996) proposes in his study on the

See figure 2: Transaction of semic marks between metalanguage and "language object"
influence of rhetorical precepts on the development of painting in the mid 15th century.4

The logocentric affiliation of TBMR seems to be confirmed with the revision of the different intentio auctoris of the authors of treatises on Musica Poetica. Various theorists attempted to construct a kind of intersystemic rhetoric applicable to both language and music, taking verbal rhetoric as its starting point. What these authors proposed was to construct an intersemiotic rhetoric or, in other words, a general rhetoric, three hundred years before the M Group formulated the same project.

But what was the objective sought by this transdisciplinary excursion?

4. Theory of Baroque Musical Rhetoric as an intersemiotic receptive strategy

Musical semiosis is extremely peculiar. Music is a weakly codified semiotic system: its expressive facets and content facets are not perfectly broken down into discrete stable units which are well defined and differentiable. Their correlations lack any clear stable delimitation and so the zero degree of a rhetorical function depends largely on the decisions taken by the receptor. When attempting to explain (and understand) music by means of rhetorical categories, the Musica Poetica theorists tried to organise some of its unstable semiotic functions. For this purpose, they turned to a metalinguistic artifice developed within a strongly codified semiotic system. In language, the expressive facets and content facets are duly broken down into discrete units, their correlations are stable and the zero degree of the rhetoric function is institutionalised.

Musical rhetoric is an intersemiotic-translinguistic system which acts in the opposite way to verbal rhetoric. Whereas the latter transgresses the order of the system, abolishing literal meanings, musical rhetoric limits the musical semantic spaces, orients the semiosis and reduces the levels of ambiguity of its semiotic nature. In this way, TBMR acts for us as a kind of inventio where
musical competence is aided by verbal or literary competences by means of transsystemic loci (or topoi). Thus, one of the consequences of TBMR was to construct a fluid and effective bridge between the literary and musical experiences of its authors (Fig. 3).

![Diagram: The TBMR as intersemiotical receptive strategy](image)

**See figure 3: The TBMR as intersemiotical receptive strategy**

In this way, despite the fact that TBMR was formulated as a precept for composition, it also functioned, and perhaps primordially so, as an intersemiotic artifice of musical comprehension.

5. The rhetorical mode of thought

The historian of rhetoric, Brian Vickers (1984, 1985) has categorically denounced the many errors and limitations of TBMR. Without any kind of contemplation, he affirms that this theoretical corpus is simply inoperative. For the venerable rhetorician, these inconsistencies are the logical result of translating and "aesthetic system" of a linguistic nature to another non-linguistic system by means of vague and fragile analogies.

Indeed, we must admit that between language and music, there is an extremely weak analogy. This is based on the more or less direct relationship between only some of the members of one system with only some of the members of the other. The epistemologist, Mario Bunge calls this relationship a
"plain formal analogy of the profound type" and places it on the weakest levels of intersystemic analogisation, below injective and bijective analogies and homomorphism and isomorphism (Bunge, 1985: 225). Bunge also warns that although the analogy is essential for all knowledge and "the perception of analogies is a first stage towards a more rigorous classification", it is a mistake (which is made too often) to think that the processes of analogisation are not only the carriers of "an heuristic function, but also a logical function" (Bunge 1985: 236-7, 239).

We must admit that this "logical insufficiency" appears repeatedly when we use the TBMR artifice as a tool for musical analysis. Nevertheless, contrary to the opinion of Vickers, we believe that this limiting factor is not result of an "abusive" process of intersystemic analogisation between music and language, but a property inherent in general rhetorical thought, present in all rhetorical argumentation.

We should not forget that the aim of rhetoric is to regulate the mechanisms which lead to persuasion. Rhetoric is the pseudoscience of convincing, of subtle deception. Rhetoric gives what is true-seeming priority over what is true; it places credible before logical and prefers emotional effect to rational argument. Rhetoric does not demonstrate, it convinces. It does not examine the facts in search of a profound truth, but rather covers the facts with a cloak of dangerous seduction. As Umberto Eco states, "rhetorical figures constitute a kind of short circuit which is useful for analogically suggesting problems which cannot be analysed in-depth" (Eco, 1994: 169).

Furthermore, TBMR itself is a carrier of the persuasive force of rhetoric. It is a fact that, even in our times, as soon as an amateur or professional musician reflects or verbalises his or her musical experience through the prism of rhetoric, he or she feels subjugated by the revelations which rhetoric allows him or her to achieve: before it, the symbolic continuum which the musical avalanche drags with it seems to become ordered. A luminous sensation of understanding suffuses the musician at the same time as they experience the satisfaction of "apprehending" something essential. However, unfortunately, when we come up against an enormous truth discovered by means of rhetorical
(or merely analogical) thought, very often the same light which reveals to us the illusion of comprehension prevents us from seeing the path to a deeper subsequent reflection. For this reason, I repeat, it is an intrinsic characteristic of rhetorical thought and not an unwanted residue of the musical adoption of the artifice of this old discipline.  

6. Theory of Baroque Musical Rhetoric and musical analysis

According to the precepts of *Musica poetica* and the analytical practices which are currently being developed from it, TMBR and its figures used as an analytical tool allow, at least in theory for the following:

1. To create typologies of procedures of repetition and transformation of musical units, on micro and macrostructural levels, attributing to them communicative intentions and/or precise semantics.

2. To explain the formation of "unusual" dissonant processes by means of the rules of classical counterpoint.

3. To describe certain narrative processes and mechanisms of suppression or addition of information to musical units on micro or macro levels.

4. To differentiate the structural and ornamental levels of a work or corpus, as well as the elements which belong to each of these.

5. To evaluate the impact on the musical form of the rhetorical development of a text in vocal music.

6. To typify musical structures which, together with some processes of dissonance, induce or demand their interpretation, favouring the conformation of extramusical semantic units. In vocal music, these are usually closely related to some of the marks of the semantic thickness of the literary text, which they allegorise.
However, every analytical practice with a rhetorical basis which seeks these objectives comes up against some problems which can be classified as endemic. These include the following:

1. It is extremely difficult to precisely identify when a musical device can be considered grammatical and when it can be considered rhetorical. We have already discussed the difficulty of establishing the zero degree of the rhetorical expression in weakly codified semiotic systems. We have also said that, in all these systems, it is the receptor and his or her competence which establish the local zero degree and, therefore, its rhetorical function (cf. Groupe M, 1993: 237-9).

2. Most rhetorical analyses limit themselves to exhibiting the taxonomised typologies of abstract rhetorical devices. Here, the reference to specific musical fragments covers the mere function of exemplification and legitimating examination of the device itself. If there is something which distinguishes a rhetorician, it is his fascination with the infinite classifications of the rhetorical figures: the taxonomic furore mentioned by Barthes. The vast majority of rhetorical analyses, from Burmeister to the present, acquire this presentation. It would seem that it is extremely difficult to carry out general analyses of entire works using the rhetorical artifice. But, once again, this is a limiting factor shared by all rhetoric, including verbal rhetoric.

3. Both the selection of pertinent units and their interpretation for the conformation of extramusical contents (the figures of hipotiposis) are highly arbitrary. The analyst is frequently unable to explain elements which, following the logic of the rhetorical exegesis, would produce semantic connotations contrary to their interpretative route. Faced with this embarrassing situation, the analyst decides to ignore them: he or she pretends that they do not exist. This could be avoided if the analyst were to consider beforehand the possible pragmatic situation of the exegetic exercise and insert it in one of the poietic or aesthesic poles. It would
thus be possible to establish hierarchies to explain the place, function and coordination of each element in and of itself and in relation to the entire work or corpus being studied, considering it a product of a specific behaviour of production and reception.

4. Finally, in the vast majority of cases, the typification of musical structures as rhetorical figures does not determine the content of their interpretation. For example, the practices of "musicological reconstruction" of Schweitzer, Shering, Pirro, Bukofzer and Chailley did not need the rhetorical artifice for their interpretations. Their results, however, are frequently similar to those of the analyses which do apply rhetorical codification. Their divergences stem from their different concepts of musical sign.

7. Toward a reformulation of rhetorical-musical analysis

It is necessary to reformulate rhetorical-musical analysis. It needs to be formalised on more rigorous and less arbitrary models. Its analytical use needs to be directed toward certain specific behaviours of producers and receptors. These should be carefully established and should be erected in an axis on which all analytical exercises will be developed.

In our opinion, and this is the hypothesis which we wish to propose in this paper, the categories of musical rhetoric, particularly the complex artifice of the figures, can be much more effective if they are used as analytical models aimed at simulating two phenomena: a) the processes related to making compositional decisions out of time (hors temps, as Iannis Xenakis calls them) and, especially b) the operations performed by the common receptor while listening in real time: i.e., the actual listening.

From this perspective, TBMR, used as a receptive or verbalisation strategy, functions as an immediate catalyst of an initial organisation of the musical experience. We must insist that we are not talking of an analytical system which aims to establish the "absolute meaning" of a work, but a
methodological artifice which makes it possible to study the *initial products of the actual listening*, that is, the initial phase of musical comprehension: the *heuristic* phase. In this regard, it does not matter how illusory or superficial this *initial comprehension* of the music is.

Thus, a rhetorical analysis, well formalised in the above terms, could explain, in rhetorical terms, certain processes of the *actual listening* which generally resist a profound analysis. For example:

1. It would explain how the listener is able to articulate syntagmatically large portions of musical text without having to rationalise excessively or use their ear-memory to the full. Indeed, using a briefly enunciable rhetorical figure, the listener establishes iconic identities with a broad margin of laxity.

2. It would describe how the listener "lives" each morphological transformation or variation of tone or modulation, as a "semantic or communicative intention" without the need to analyse it technically. It would make pertinent traits which, in other systems, are considered suprasegmental.

3. It would help to understand the continuous changes and combinations which the receptor, in real time, makes of the *type listening* as defined by Delalande (1989: 75-6).

4. It would satisfactorily explain the coexistence of the contrary and contradictory semantic units which arise when the receptor isolates and atemporalises particular moments of the musical event, enunciable in figures or complexes of figures.

5. It would help to articulate, in coherent schemes, the networks of hierarchies and priorities of musical traits, as well as the networks of selection of specific semantic marks of the literary text in vocal music which are essential to the production of meaning. Both function simultaneously as parallel axes on which meaning is built during the actual listening experience.
Indeed, as stated by Imberti, Francés, Nattiez, etc., musical meaning must be sought in the totality of the work and not in small units. Nevertheless, during the actual listening experience, the receptor generates different meanings which can take on the status of partial meanings. These may be rejected or forgotten during the work. However, they always play an active part in the constitution of the global meaning: the semantic marks of one of them models the marks of the others.14

Rhetorical thought, by its very nature, not only makes it possible to act simultaneously on the local and global level of the work, but its "logic" allows for the appearance of contrary units without putting the total coherence of the system at risk.

A model of these characteristics is what we will attempt to construct using the extremely rich legacy of the rhetorical-musical theorisation of Musica poetica, one of the first theories on musical signification.


Notes

1. Writers as Caccini o Quantz mentioned theses links but they did not systemized it. 
Regresar a texto

2. George Puttenham (The Arte of English Poesy; 1589); Henry Peacham S. (The Garden of Eloquence; London; 1593); Henry Peacham jr. (The complete Gentlement; London; 1622); John Hoskyns (Directions for speech and style; ca. 1599); Francis Bacon (The two Bookes Of the Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning divine and humane; Londres; 1605 y Sylva Sylvarum; Londres; 1627) and Charles Butler (The Principles of Music in Singing and Setting: with the Two fold Use Thereof, Ecclesiastical and Civil; Londres; 1636). See especially the claims of Henry Peacham the younger and Francis Bacon (1605). Cf. Butler (1980) y Palisca (1994).
Regresar a texto

3. But this phenomena is always present on the construction of all scientific theory. As Mario Bunge note, "one model-object, when is inserted in a theorical discourse, takes all its peculiarities, especially its legal claims" (Bunge, 1985: 43).
Regresar a texto

4. Baxandall claims: around 1435, the "paint composition" growt was influenced by the latin language an its rhetoric through the critical discourse of the firts humanists. When they chose latin rather vernacular languages, they didn't adopt only its linguistic cathegories, but also its authentical perceptive models. Cf. Baxandall (1996: 24, 27, 74-5).
Regresar a texto

6. Bunge remarks: a member x of the universal set O, is analogous to "an associated member" y, as long as x and y take part of several "objective qualities" either if it exist a correspondency between the parts or qualities of x e y.

7. Emphasis mine.

8. See the claims about the TRMB by musicians of the "authentical performance" as Harnoncourt (1984); Herreweghe (1985) o Immerseel (1995).

9. The verbal rhetoric analysis hide theses irregularities because the language, as high codified semiotic system, has a lot of developed and precise analytical tools for the assistance of the logical construction of the analytical discourse.

10. Note the particularity of the historical development: an element considered by an era as rhetorical artifice, could be regarded by the next as a grammatical rule of musical syntax.


14. Imberti (1975) insist on amplitude of unities for the study of musical signification: as longest as possible. However, in his experimental research, one can observe his preference for smallest units. Moreover, he makes experimental auditions of isolated unities, far away its contextual frame. This obstructs the study of emergent signification from the interaction an intermodalization between units, and from long sections and whole works.

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