A D V E R I T A T E M

I N T O N A Z I O N I

THE BREATH OF TIME

AGOGICS, METRE AND PHRASING
IN CLASSICAL MUSIC PERFORMANCE

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NOTE ON THE RECORDINGS

The examples discussed in this book refer to audio and video recordings available online. Since web addresses can be long, awkward to transcribe and liable to change over time, we have collected all the recordings on a dedicated page:

`http://luigigaggero.com/styled-20/styled-38/`

The numbers given in the text correspond to the references on that page, arranged in chapter order. This allows readers to access the recordings more easily and enables the list to be updated should any of the links cease to be available.



INTRODUCTION

This book sets out to describe and establish the *Agogic Law*[1] governing the proper flow of time in Western classical music.[2] This law springs from the profound and dynamic relationship between the *form* of a composition (its metrical structure) and its *content* (melodies, harmonies, rhythms, accents...). Problems of interpretation often arise from two opposing yet equally problematic attitudes. On the one hand, there is a 'naive' approach, emotionally drawn to the composition's 'interesting elements' without recognising their role in its metrical organisation; it thereby distorts not only those very elements, but the overall meaning of the work as well. On the other is a 'structuralist' approach which, in the name of a supposed 'objectivity', suppresses all emotion and proves incapable of empathising with the content. As a symptom of an alienated relationship with form, this approach produces an affectlessly uniform time, drained of meaning. *The dynamic interaction between metre and affect, embodied and revealed through breath, instead generates a necessary and coherent flow of time.* This is the horizon towards which every good interpretation of a work – for all the potentially infinite variety among such interpretations – should tend. Its nature is undulatory: it does not consist in a simple alternation of accelerations and decelerations, but in a hierarchy of minute expansions and contractions operating on several levels, from the bar and groups of bars to the phrase, the period and ultimately the large-scale form. To play well is to inhabit this undulatory structure of time, allowing every musical event to find its function within the larger wave that contains it.

The development of this intuition is the fruit of long reflection combined with the constant 'practical testing' made possible by an intensive concert life. The idea of setting it down in writing, however, has a very precise origin which – with a touch of levity – I shall share with the reader. In 2023 I was in Austria conducting Beethoven's *Fifth Piano Concerto*. Although I had always tried to avoid finding myself in such situations, the soloist – perhaps too famous and too busy to rehearse with us – had made himself available only for the dress rehearsal. Half an hour before we were due onstage, the pianist invited me into his dressing room to explain the 'essential points' of his interpretation (the thought that I, too, might have one did not seem to occur to him). I had barely crossed the threshold when he sat down at the piano and pronounced the following words: 'I have only one fundamental thing to tell you: within a group of bars, *I never wait on the last one*. I always manage my *rubato* by lengthening the preceding bars, but *I never slow down before the beginning of the next group*.' As I tried to sketch something resembling a

[1] See 'agogics' in the Glossary.

[2] Our principal, though not exclusive, concern is Western classical music organised into bars: broadly speaking, the repertory extending from the mid-seventeenth to the first half of the twentieth century.

cordial, professional smile, the realisation dawned on me that this was going to be a difficult concert. How could an artist nearing eighty, with a lifetime of study behind him, display such a misunderstanding of the foundations of phrasing within classical metre? Sure enough, the pianist-who-never-waits-on-the-last-bar was already preparing to play examples of his phrasing, confirming exactly what I had feared: he systematically placed *agogic emphasis* on the long notes within a phrase – that is, he delayed their arrival by lengthening the notes that preceded them – and thus created a 'metrical muddle' which, fortunately for him, Herr Beethoven was not there to hear. This phrasing turned the long notes on the second metrical beat into the climax of the phrase, giving the illusion that they fell on the first beat; the first beat consequently lost its function and became a kind of *upbeat*…

When I returned home, I began to reflect seriously on the matter. Phrasing that *emphasises the second beat of the metrical structure* (whether the second quarter-note of a bar or the second bar in a group), *and correspondingly produces an acceleration from one group of bars to the next*, had always seemed so hideous to me that I had never considered the possibility that anyone might hear it differently. Listening more closely, however, I discovered that other famous performers phrased in the same way. Yet my musical instinct told me that the issue could not simply be dismissed as 'a matter of taste'. Thus began the gestation of the book you are holding. As I shall try to show in the pages that follow, I believe there are fundamentally two ways of listening to – and therefore playing – music. One is *ontological*[3] (or *organic*): it inscribes feeling within the measure imposed by metrical structure, creating a dynamic equilibrium in which form and expression are integrated without either overpowering the other. The second is *sentimental* (or *naive*): it focuses instead on 'salient' musical elements – long notes, high notes, modulations, accents and so forth.[4] These two attitudes may be compared to reading a poem either with respect for its *lines* (its metrical structure), or with regard only for the *stresses* and *meanings* of individual words, destroying its rhythm and turning it into prose. This book therefore aims to describe the principal features of musical phrasing arising from organic and naive listening, and to establish the thesis that the former is 'objectively' more correct than the latter. Even if we fail to persuade you, we shall nevertheless be glad to have described two radically opposed musical attitudes, helping performers and lovers of music (and poetry) to understand more clearly their own *musical poetics* and that embodied in their favourite performances. In short, we hope this

[3] In this book, then, the terms 'ontological' and 'organic' describe an approach founded on the *alliance between structure and affect*. Musical interpretation neither merely executes an abstract structure nor allows itself to be guided solely by emotion, but respects the creative tension between form and meaning, metre and breath.

[4] The reader will recall that, at the beginning of this *Introduction*, we also described a *third* approach: one that follows metre rigidly without empathising with the content. At this point, however, a fundamental distinction must be stressed. 'Naive' listening, however mistaken, remains *natural*: it is simply the result of limited musical understanding or culture, which can be overcome through study and, one hopes, with the aid of a book such as this. The *repression of affect* characteristic of 'rigidly metrical' listening, by contrast – whether it stems from a deliberately structuralist approach or from a performer's lack of awareness – appears in either case to indicate a deeper problem extending beyond the musical sphere. This attitude is not merely an interpretative deficiency, but rather a difficulty in listening to oneself, of which the failure to listen musically is 'only' a consequence. It is therefore not a third mode of listening, but more properly a mode of *non-listening*, however intentional.

book may prove useful to all musicians – including those who, even after reading it, choose to continue *not* waiting on the last beat.

Resolving this difficulty calls – if not exclusively, at least as a matter of priority – for paths lying outside the musical domain and therefore beyond the scope of this specifically musical inquiry. Where appropriate, however, we shall not fail to point out the effects this approach may have on the interpretation of particular compositions and to relate it to the other two.

Luigi Gaggero, January 2025

1

THE IMPRINT OF METRE

The epic poems, foundations of Western culture, were transmitted orally for centuries by *aoidoi*, singers who accompanied themselves on the lyre. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, too, before Homer committed them to writing between the eighth and seventh centuries BC, were first and foremost *sung*. To make these immensely long texts easier to memorise and understand, they were organised into *lines of verse*.[1] In later centuries, even when poetic texts became 'emancipated' from song, they retained its *imprint*: *metrical form*. In parallel, with the emergence of European instrumental music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, compositions retained the *metrical structure*[2] that until then had been 'guaranteed' by the poetic texts of vocal works. It was around the time of J. S. Bach (1685-1750) that composers began to organise their works into regular bars, each governed by a consistent time signature (4/4, 3/4, 6/8...). This division into equal 'portions of *metre*'[3] – bars – produced a *periodic alternation of strong and weak beats*, which rapidly became one of the distinguishing features of Western music. In poetry as in music, metre is therefore a horizontal structure which, through its reassuring periodicity, guides our listening and organises the natural flow of sonic material. The musical elements of a composition – harmony, melody and rhythm – are embraced by this structure, which acts as their organising principle and thus takes precedence over the other compositional elements. In poetry, we distinguish between different *metrical orders*.[4] William Wordsworth's sonnet *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*, for example, contains *fourteen lines* arranged as an *octave and a sestet*, each written in *iambic pentameter*, with the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA CDCDCD. Its syntax repeatedly crosses the line endings: in *wear / The beauty of the morning* and *lie / Open unto the fields*, the thought flows through the metre, creating enjambments that show how metre articulates, rather than imprisons, sense:

> Earth has not anything to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty:
> This City now doth, like a garment, wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

[1] Their *metre* was normally the hexameter, later used by Latin poets as well (Virgil's *Aeneid* will suffice as an example here).

[2] See 'metrical structure' in the Glossary.

[3] See 'metre' in the Glossary.

[4] We consciously avoid recent musicological terms such as '*hypermeter*', which in this context would seem to us unhelpful, if not positively misleading.