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The Doctrine of Affections in Music: Where Art Meets Reason

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Research & Scholarship SYMPOSIUM

The Doctrine of Affections in Music: Where Art Meets Reason

The Doctrine of Affections was a widespread understanding of music and musicality during the Baroque era. The Doctrine was a result of the philosophy of reason and science as it coincided with music. It aimed to reconcile what man knew about science and the human body, and what man thought he knew about music. It was a reconciliation of practical musicianship and theoretical music which had begun to rise in the time. Though it is generally understood as being apart from Enlightenment thinking, the Doctrine is a result of Enlightenment-style philosophy. As the Enlightenment sought to explain why things occurred in nature, the Doctrine of Affections aimed to scientifically explain man's reaction to music. It presumed that emotions could be represented and elicited through specific figurations of music and it perceived that music could possibly relate with the body humors and remedy illness and imbalance. The Doctrine of Affections directly shapes musical composition through specific modes and tonalities, meters, and rhythms all culminating in the "Baroque" style. Its influence is overwhelmingly present in the music of J.S. Bach and Handel. Affections, in conjunction with the four temperaments and body humors, thusly result in specific emotional reactions in listeners.