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Joshua L. Dissmore

Cedarville University, jdissmore@cedarville.edu

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Baroque Music and the Doctrine of Affections: Putting the Affections into Effect

Joshua L. Dissmore

Cedarville University

“The basis of music is sound; its aim is to please and to arouse various emotions in us.”¹

This statement by Rene Descartes, a prominent French philosopher and mathematician of the early seventeenth century, provides a general framework for interpreting and understanding Baroque music as a whole. During the Baroque period, composers began to place a much greater emphasis on music’s dramatic power to express different passions and elicit emotional responses from the audience. As this “Doctrine of Affections” began to take hold, the expression of emotions such as love, sorrow, joy, rage, and pity became the chief objective of Baroque compositions.² In his *Compendium musicae* (Compendium of Music), Descartes also informs, “The means to this end, i.e., the attributes of sound, are principally two: namely, its differences of duration or time, and its differences of tension from high to low.”³ Descartes understood that the communication of affects to the listeners by way of sound required strategic organization of the musical elements of pitch and time, which resulted in a seemingly formulaic yet indispensable approach to composition. Therefore, throughout the Baroque

¹ Rene Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, trans. Walter Robert (American Institute of Musicology, 1961), 11.

² Dietrich Bartel, *Musica oetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 48.

³ Descartes, 11.

period, the Doctrine of Affections governed musical composition through the musical elements of intervals, key, and tempo.

This Baroque practice of relating music with various emotions dates back to ancient Greece and the teachings of the temperaments. The four temperaments, including sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic, were each associated with separate affections. In particular, the affections of love and joy characterized a sanguine temperament, anger and fury choleric, sorrow and pain melancholic, and peacefulness and moderate joy phlegmatic.⁴ According to Greek philosophy, individuals are moved to such affections through a change in balance of the four temperaments. Music allegedly had the ability to arouse these affections within the individual to produce an intended emotional response.⁵ The method in provoking these responses became a relevant topic among Baroque composers, and consequently spurred the development of the Doctrine of Affections. Specifically, one tool that Baroque composers utilized to express emotions in their music was intervals.

The proper affective uses of intervals was a primary subject of interest for the seventeenth-century German born composer and theorist, Johann Mattheson (1681-1764). Mattheson was a well-known opera composer and a leading proponent of the Doctrine of Affections. His dedication to researching emotional expression through instrumental music produced a wealth of theoretical works and compositional guides.⁶ One of his works, titled *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), contains a thorough outline of melodic intervals and their

⁴ Bartel, 37.

⁵ Ibid, 36-39.

⁶ Maho A. Ishiguro, "The Affective Properties of Keys in Instrumental Music from the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2010), 23.

affective purposes. For example, Mattheson argues that a major third represents liveliness, a minor third mourning, a fifth boldness, and a seventh supplication.⁷ Mattheson's understanding of intervals and their affective properties exerted a strong influence on composers of his day, and has served as a helpful reference for composers of all following generations.

Mattheson leveraged his understanding of intervals to explain how music could create specific passions.⁸ He insists, "Joy is an expansion of our vital spirits, it follows sensibly and naturally that this affect is best expressed by large and expanded intervals."⁹ Thus, Mattheson observed that joyful music was marked by wider intervals, and subsequently, he states that to convey sadness, "the narrowest intervals are the most suitable."¹⁰ Systematically, he proceeds to describe love, hope, anger, and many other affects, and how they can be best communicated through the use of intervals. Mattheson's guidelines are by no means comprehensive or exclusive, but they are affirmed in the vast majority of Baroque music.

While Mattheson was a strong advocate for the Doctrine of Affections in Baroque music, it was the work of the composers themselves that popularized music's rhetorical and emotional purposes. One such composer was Johann Sebastian Bach.¹¹ In a detailed case study of Bach's *Kreuzstab Cantata* (BWV 56), author Georg Corall investigates the emotional content of both the vocal libretto and the accompanying instrumental music. The subject of this particular cantata is the Christian journey of "carrying the cross." The text emphasizes that Jesus traveled

⁷ Frederick Wessel, "The Affektenlehre in the Eighteenth Century" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1955), 2-3.

⁸ Ishiguro, 24

⁹ Johann Mattheson and Hans Lenneberg, "Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 2, no. 1 (1958), 51-52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Georg Corall, "Johann Sebastian Bach's Kreuzstab Cantata (BWV 56): Identifying the Emotional Content of the Libretto," *Limina* 20, no. 3 (2015), 2.

by boat, and the *Kreuzstab*, or Jacob's staff, was a navigational instrument.¹² Thus, the text and music depict a sea voyage that ultimately ends in a yearning for earthly death to see Christ in heaven.¹³ In the opening aria of the cantata, Corall explains Bach's sequence of large intervals in the first five notes of the piece to represent "the joyful wish to carry this cross-staff—that navigation instrument that will lead through the burden of life to happiness."¹⁴ Although the text itself and word-painting provide the main idea of the piece, the musical intervals express emotional color, and reveal the affects (joy, elation) that Bach intended to evoke within the listeners. In the second movement, Corall notes Bach's use of quickly moving arpeggios (major and minor thirds) to indicate the affections of anticipation and excitement as the ship is sailing upon the rolling waves at sea (Figure 1).¹⁵ Throughout the piece, Bach emphasizes consonant intervals to communicate the affections of contentment, pleasure, and joy. This use of intervals conforms to Mattheson's guide, and seems appropriate to convey the affects which Bach intended.¹⁶

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Basso, Violoncello, and Continuo. The Basso part is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. It contains the lyrics: "Mein Wan-del auf der Welt ist ein-ner Schiff-fahrt gleich:". The Violoncello part features a continuous arpeggiated pattern of eighth notes. The Continuo part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

Figure 1: J. S. Bach, *Kreuzstab Cantata*, movement two, measures 1–3. Arpeggios in the cello part to represent affects of excitement and joy.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ Wessel, "The Affektenlehre in the Eighteenth Century", 3.

The Doctrine of Affections not only influenced the use of intervals in vocal music, but also governed instrumental texture. The scholar Dana Wilson asserts, “During Bach’s time, the composition of vocal music sought to express the affection of the text; in turn, instrumental compositions (or each movement of multimovement works) ‘meditated’ on one affection by restricting itself to one short, clearly defined pattern.”¹⁷ This posed a challenge to composers because they could not simply rely on the vocal text or word painting to express their intended emotions, but instead, had to communicate affections through the music alone. This aspiration was successfully accomplished through the works of the Baroque composer Arcangelo Corelli.

Corelli, a renowned Italian violinist and composer of sonatas, trio-sonatas, and concerti-grossi, demonstrated the ability of instrumental music to communicate an idea and appeal to the emotions of the listener.¹⁸ In the first movement of his *Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6 No. 1*, Corelli crafts the intervals of his melodic lines in a way that creates the affect of joy and peace.¹⁹ His opening melody in the first violin features a succession of octave leaps, which Mattheson associates with the affect of joy.²⁰ This opening is also marked a by three-note motive consisting of small, consonant intervals that lead into the octave leaps (Figure 2).²¹ In Mattheson’s *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, he states that such a pattern represents tenderness and pleasantness.²² The rest of the piece continues to build upon this defined pattern, and convincingly expresses the passions of joyfulness and contentment. Mattheson’s

¹⁷ Dana Wilson, "The Role of Patterning in Music." *Leonardo* 22, no. 1 (1989), 101.

¹⁸ Stewart Deas, "Arcangelo Corelli," *Music & Letters* 34, no. 1 (1953), 5-6.

¹⁹ Corelli, *Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6, No. 1*.

²⁰ Mattheson and Lenneberg, "Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music", 51-52.

²¹ Corelli, *Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6, No. 1*.

²² Wessel, "The Affektenlehre in the Eighteenth Century", 3.

understanding of the Doctrine of Affections and the function of musical intervals reveals the intended affect behind Corelli's instrumental work without the aid of text or lyrics.



Figure 2: Arcangelo Corelli, *Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6 No. 1*, movement one, measures 1-4. Three note motives leading to octave leaps; represents joy and tenderness.

Johann Sebastian Bach's son, C. P. E. Bach, also practiced the use of intervals to express emotions in his various compositions. In an article concerning the affections in his *Flute and Continuo Sonatas*, author Sarah McNulty highlights different ways in which Bach utilized the musical elements to convey his intended emotions. As stated by McNulty, C. P. E. Bach used the technique of pathopoeia, which McNulty defines as "intense or vehement affection mainly through the use of chromatic passing notes."²³ The sequence of half steps produces an enraged and violent mood, depicting God's wrath at the failure of man to keep His holy commands.²⁴ While in J. S. Bach's work, he used intervals to communicate the emotions of joy and excitement, C. P. E. Bach uses intervals to express anger and fury. Although a universal method of interval writing did not exist, generally all Baroque composers understood how to use intervals to communicate different affections, and the practice was fueled by the studies of philosophers such as Mattheson.

²³ Sarah McNulty, "A Musical-Rhetorical Vocabulary in C. P. E. Bach's Flute and Continuo Sonatas, Wq 125-129 and 134, and Implications for Performance," *Early Music Performer* no. 25 (2009), 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

Just as intervals governed the composition of Baroque music, so did the choice of key signature. A leading musical figure of the Baroque era who thoroughly studied key signatures and their affective purposes was the French composer and theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764).²⁵ In describing Rameau's legacy, journalist Charles Paul writes, "Though he indisputably was France's greatest and most popular composer in the eighteenth century, his most cherished ambition was to be numbered among the scientific elect."²⁶ Rameau was a very well-trained musician and operatic composer, yet his study of musical affects and the mathematical principles behind those affects is what earned him his reputation. His *Traité de l'harmonie (Treatise on Harmony, 1722)* outlines the common affective uses of various keys and presents his professional opinion on the matter. Rameau offers:

The key of either C, D, or A in the major mode is suitable for songs of mirth and joy. Either F or B-flat is appropriate for tempests, furies, and such subjects. Either G or E is right for both tender and happy songs. Grandeur and magnificence can be expressed by the key of either D, A, or E. The minor mode in the key of either d, g, b, or e is apt for sweetness and gentleness. The key of either c or f minor is suitable for gentleness or laments; f or b-flat minor is appropriate for melancholy songs.²⁷

Thus, Rameau's detailed study of key signatures and their affective purposes both summarized common uses of keys in Baroque music, and specified his opinion on which keys are appropriate for communicating different emotions.

²⁵ Charles Paul, "Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764), the Musician as Philosophe," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 114, no. 2 (1970), 140.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rodney Farnsworth, "How the Other Half Sounds: An Historical Survey of Musical Rhetoric during the Baroque and After," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1990), 213.

It is important to understand, however, that not all Baroque philosophers and composers agreed upon a standard method of associating keys with affections. Many believed that each key could be used to express a variety of affections rather than one in particular.²⁸ In fact, Mattheson “stressed that his (Mattheson’s) suggestions regarding the expressive nature of the keys were only his personal interpretations.”²⁹ He reinforces the importance of the key signature in creating affects, and even devotes an entire chapter of *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* to presenting his affective opinions of each key. Nevertheless, Mattheson emphasizes that his opinions are merely opinions, and must be treated as nothing more than a working summary.

Although there were differing views concerning the relationship of keys to emotions, it is clearly evident that the Doctrine of Affections influenced Baroque composers’ choices of keys to produce the passions and affects that they intended. In an article contained in the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, journalist Rodney Farnsworth insists that the affective properties of keys, “. . . were useful to invention — that is, of course, to creativity; moreover, the composers themselves believed that these techniques affected the listener — this belief alone is enough to give them importance, especially when found in a Purcell, a Rameau, or a Bach.”³⁰ Another prominent Baroque figure whose selection of keys relied upon the Doctrine of Affections was Antonio Vivaldi.

²⁸ Dietrich Bartel, *Musica poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music*, 44-45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ Farnsworth, “How the Other Half Sounds: An Historical Survey of Musical Rhetoric during the Baroque and After,” 213.

The famous composer and virtuoso violinist Antonio Vivaldi's work, *Le Quattro Stagioni* (*The Four Seasons*), is a series of four solo violin concertos, each depicting one of the seasons.³¹ In each of the four movements, Vivaldi strategically chose a key that would depict the affections and emotions associated with the specific season.³² For example, "The choice of F major for *Autumn* is easy to understand; being the natural key of *corni da Caccia*, it was traditionally associated with hunting and bucolic settings."³³ *Spring* is written in E major, which was not a key commonly used by Vivaldi. However, according to Rameau, E major is suitable for expressing "grandeur and magnificence;" an appropriate choice for the season of life and growth.³⁴ *Winter* is in the key of F minor, which Mattheson describes as "mild and relaxed, yet at the same time profound and heavy with despair and fatal anxiety."³⁵ Mattheson continues, "It is very moving in its beautiful expression of black, helpless melancholy which occasionally causes the listener to shudder."³⁶ All of these affections are typical of the harsh winter season, and the piece would likely transmit melancholic and depressing feelings to the listeners.³⁷ Finally, *Summer* was written in the key of G minor, which was interpreted as "an implication of anxiety and threat."³⁸ Overall, the work contains two movements in major keys as well as two in minor, balancing out the four temperaments. Thus, Vivaldi clearly understood the

³¹ Paul Everett, *Vivaldi, The Four Seasons, and Other Concertos, Op.8* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁴ Farnsworth, "How the Other Half Sounds: An Historical Survey of Musical Rhetoric during the Baroque and After," 213.

³⁵ Hans Lenneberg and Johann Mattheson, "Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 2, no. 2 (1958), 236.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Bartel, 37.

³⁸ Everett, 68.

relationship between the Doctrine of Affections and key signatures, and this relationship characterizes *Le Quattro Stagioni* as a whole.

Another example of the influence of the Doctrine of Affections upon the choice of key signature can be found in J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. Throughout the entire work, which interweaves Matthew's Gospel story and Christ's crucifixion with choral movements and instrumental accompaniment, Bach used the key of E minor to represent and illustrate the crucifixion story.³⁹ Musicologist Eric Chafe articulates, "E-minor passages coincide with the successive stages of the Crucifixion drama: Jesus' capture; the initial sentence of death from the Jews; the call for crucifixion; the scourging and delivering over of Jesus for crucifixion; the crucifixion itself."⁴⁰ In regard to the key of E minor, Mattheson states, "Whatever one may do with it, it will remain pensive profound, sad, and expressive of grief; in such a way however, that some chance of consolation remains."⁴¹ Therefore, it seems as if this choice of key was an ideal fit for Bach's expression of Christ's suffering and grief, yet at the same time, for offering a glimpse of hope that lies in the resurrection.

Near the end of the Baroque period, the German flutist and composer Johann Joachim Quantz developed his own guide concerning the relationship between key signatures and the passions.⁴² Quantz, perhaps due to the expressive limitations of the flute, restricted the passions to "boldness, flattery, gaiety/liveliness, melancholy (tenderness), majesty (the sublime), the pathetic and the serious."⁴³ Nevertheless, Quantz underscored the importance of

³⁹ Eric Chafe, "J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*: Aspects of Planning, Structure, and Chronology," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35, no. 1 (1982): 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lenneberg and Mattheson, "Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music," 235.

⁴² David Lasocki, "Quantz and the Passions: Theory and Practice," *Early Music* 6, no. 4 (1978): 559.

⁴³ Ibid.

the role that key signatures play in the communication of the affections to the audience. Author David Lasocki writes of Quantz's works, "A major key generally depicts the gay, bold, serious, or sublime; a minor key, the flattering or melancholy (tender)."⁴⁴ In Quantz's *Trio Sonata in C Major* for recorder, flute and basso continuo, each movement's key signature indicates the affections and emotions that he attempted to convey.⁴⁵ The first movement, "affettuoso," was written in the key of C major to impart feelings of gaiety and charm.⁴⁶ The word "affettuoso" in tandem with C major also fits Mattheson's description of the key, which states that "A clever composer who chooses the accompanying instruments well can even use it for tender and charming compositions."⁴⁷ The third movement, "largetto," is in A minor, which Quantz used to imply feelings of melancholy and sorrow.⁴⁸ Through the appropriate, affective use of key signatures, Quantz work, like Vivaldi's *Le Quattro Stagioni*, strikes a superb balance between the passions.

While there were many different interpretations of the relationships between specific keys and their expressive functions, the influence of the Doctrine of Affections in composition is indisputable. The previous examples only represent a minuscule sample out of the overwhelming breadth of Baroque music, yet the Doctrine of Affections pervaded most genres, styles, and elements of composition.

Finally, the Doctrine of Affections governed the use of tempo. Like intervals and key signatures, the composer's choice of tempo was an additional means for communicating

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 561.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lenneberg and Mattheson, "Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music," 235.

⁴⁸ David Lasocki, "Quantz and the Passions: Theory and Practice," 563.

intended affections to the listeners. In regards to common tempo markings, Mattheson once again provides general guidelines for identifying the affective purposes behind them. He remarks, “Adagio expresses sadness; lamento, a lament; lento, relief; andante, hope; affettuoso, love; allegro, consolation; presto, desire; etc. Whether or not the composer intended it, this is the effect.”⁴⁹ While these tempo markings mentioned by Mattheson are strictly Italian terms, he advises that synonymous terms in other languages should be interpreted in a similar manner.⁵⁰

However, the affective purpose of the composer’s chosen tempo is typically reinforced by the elements of intervals and key as well. For example, in the aforementioned piece by Arcangelo Corelli, (*Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6 No. 1*) the primary tempo markings are Allegro and Largo (lento).⁵¹ Thus, according to Mattheson, the piece would likely express the emotions of relief and consolation. As previously discussed, the melodic intervals of the piece suggest the passions of joy, contentment, and pleasantness. Likewise, the key of the piece is D major, which Mattheson associates with a gay and delicate quality.⁵² Therefore, all three of the elements complement one another to create joyous, pleasant and agreeable affections. Had Corelli decided to employ contrasting tempo markings such as adagio (sadness) or presto (desire), it is likely that the piece would not be able to convincingly express the emotions that both the intervals and key signature suggest.

⁴⁹ Mattheson and Lenneberg, “Johann Mattheson on Affect and Rhetoric in Music”, 52.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Corelli, *Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6, No. 1*.

⁵² Wessel, “The Affektenlehre in the Eighteenth Century”, 1.

Another aspect of tempo that is governed by the Doctrine of Affections is meter. Rene Descartes, the renowned French mathematician and musicologist, concluded that “The effect of a piece depends upon the mathematical proportions in its meter.”⁵³ Descartes, being a mathematician at heart, resolved to better understand musical affects through scientific study and experimentation. While many of his findings and conclusions remain subject to debate, his theories concerning tempo and meter in Baroque music demonstrate the importance of the composer’s choice of meter to the communication of affections. Descartes writes, “. . . in general a slower pace arouses in us quieter feelings such as languor, sadness, fear, pride, etc. A faster pace arouses faster emotions, such as joy, etc. On the same basis one can state that duple meter, 4/4 and all meters divisible by two, are of slower types than triple meters.”⁵⁴ Thus, Descartes associates triple meters with “faster” or “louder” emotions because they “occupy the senses more, since there are more things to be noticed in them.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, Descartes believes that duple meters evoke “quieter” emotions because they consist of “simple arithmetic” instead of “complicated metrical numbers.”⁵⁶ Descartes cites popular Baroque dance music as evidence that triple meters are more appropriate for the presentation of “faster” and more excitable passions. Although there are many instances in which Baroque music strays from Descartes’s claims, his theories emphasize the effort that composers made to craft the musical elements in a way that properly and uniformly conveys the emotions that they intended.

⁵³ Deborah M. Vlock, “Sterne, Descartes, and the music in *Tristram Shandy*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 38, no. 3 (1998): 524-525.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The work titled "Suite No. 3 in A Minor" from *Pièces de Clavecin* by the French composer and harpsichordist, Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, is a fitting example of a piece that displays a variety of tempos and meters to express different affections.⁵⁷ Since this entire work is in the same key, Jacquet de la Guerre relied on the elements of tempo and meter to balance the passions and affects. In total, the piece contains eight movements. The opening Prelude is unmeasured, but each of the following movements are different dances written in a wide range of tempos and meters.⁵⁸ The first dance, "Allemande," is in common time (duple meter) with a moderate tempo. According to Mattheson and Descartes, this would suggest "quieter" affections such as languor or even hope.⁵⁹ The next dance, "Courante I and II," is in 3/2 (triple meter) with a brisk and flowing tempo, which would indicate emotions of joy, consolation, or desire. "Sarabande," the fourth dance, is in 3/4 (triple meter) with a slow tempo, which Mattheson would interpret as conveying the affection of sadness.⁶⁰ The remaining dance movements contain similar contrasts, and are representative of the influence of the Doctrine of Affections. Like Vivaldi in *Le Quattro Stagioni* and Quantz in his *Trio Sonata in C Major*, Jacquet de la Guerre, through the careful management of tempo and meter, masterfully balances the expression of the affections despite the lack of varying keys.

In conclusion, the Doctrine of Affections's pervasive and monumental influence upon the composition of Baroque music is clearly evidenced by the works, beliefs, and philosophies of the musicians of the era. Specifically, this influence governed the composer's use of the

⁵⁷ Jacquet de La Guerre, "Suite No. 3 in A Minor, *Pièces de Clavecin*."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Vlock, "Sterne, Descartes, and the music in *Tristram Shandy*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 524.

⁶⁰ Wessel, "The Affektenlehre in the Eighteenth Century", 1.

elements of intervals, key, and tempo. As leading figures such as Mattheson and Descartes professed, composers could strategically use each of these three elements to convey their intended affects. The works of the previously mentioned composers including J. S. Bach, Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi, and others demonstrate the ability of well-crafted musical elements to affect the audience emotionally and collectively. However, it was generally a combination of the three that complemented one another to create the strongest and most convincing affects. Thus, the feelings and passions imparted to the listeners of Baroque music are not merely individual, incidental, or circumstantial, but rather, they are the manifestation of the composer's careful arrangement, comprehension, and mastery of the musical elements.

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