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The term “rhetoric” has slightly disreputable associations in modern-day English, more often associated with bombast and slippery politicians than with the grand oratorical traditions of classical Greece and Rome. In
musicological studies on eighteenth-century topics, rhetoric has long enjoyed a more exalted status because of the linking of rhetorical terms with music in the writings of German theorists including Johann Mattheson, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Heinrich Christoph Koch, and others. A number of scholars (Elaine Sisman, Mark Evan Bonds, and Kofi Agawu, to name only a few) have followed Mattheson’s and Forkel’s lead in connecting the six parts of a classical oration (exordium, narratio, propositio, confirmatio, confutatio, and peroratio) to musical form in the works of composers of the time, including Joseph Haydn. In their view, such men were not only familiar with the writings of Mattheson, et al., but had gained at least some knowledge of rhetorical terminology in the course of their education. Some (like Peter Hoyt and László Somfai) have objected that most rhetorically-inspired analyses have to finesse the differences between the six-part structure of the oration and typical eighteenth-century formal procedures and have questioned whether rhetorical thinking actually guided compositional procedure. Others have focused less on parallels of construction and more on music’s ability to communicate a variety of topics and affects. Simon McVeigh and Jehoash Hirschberg, for example, argue that the early eighteenth-century Italian concerto was characterized by vibrant rhetorical arguments carried out “both
intrinsically and by reference to the surrounding repertoire.”

But they note that the association of music and rhetoric was made by German and not Italian theorists, and add that instead of making “futile attempts to force musical analysis into a rigid rhetorical framework, we will instead work the other way around, resorting to rhetorical concepts whenever they seem to contribute to our understanding of the unfolding of the ritornello movement.”

For the most part, the collection of essays edited by Tom Beghin and Sander M. Goldberg takes a relatively broad view of the subject. The volume grew from papers presented at conference at UCLA in 2001 on the topic “‘A Clever Orator’: Colloquies and Performances Exploring Rhetoric in Haydn’s Chamber Music.” The volume features an interesting mixture of performers and scholars from various fields: two professors of English (Marshall Brown and Timothy Erwin), one of classics (Sander M. Goldberg), and one of history (James van Horn Melton) join musicologists (Mark Evan Bonds, Elaine Sisman, László Somfai, and James Webster) and musicologist-performers (Tom Beghin, Elisabeth Le Guin, and Annette Richards) to provide “Backgrounds” (theoretical, historical, and aesthetic) and “Foregrounds” (practical applications) on the performance of rhetoric. The
now almost obligatory accompanying CD of examples has been upgraded to a DVD that features, among other things, reconstructions of classical oratory (for Goldberg’s chapter) and Beghin’s oratorically-inspired performances of Haydn sonatas.

Video Clip 1: Tom Beghin, Hob. XVI: 22, mvt. 1 recapitulation.

[Embed MorrowBeghinVid1]

After Le Guin’s clever reconstruction, “A Visit to the Salon de Parnasse,” of the rhetorical conversation in one eighteenth-century salon, with a Haydn piano trio as Exhibit A in the discussion, “Foregrounds” begins with a fascinating and enlightening essay by Goldberg, “Performing Theory: Variations on a Theme by Quintilian,” on the differences between the Greek and Roman concepts of rhetoric. Goldberg observes that the Athenian legal system meant that every citizen had to speak for himself when in front of a jury; for someone with limited experience in persuasive argument, a professional speech writer generally constructed a speech that the citizen would memorize and repeat. Thus, the power of the argument had to lie more in the actual words than in the delivery. The Roman social structure, with its patronage system, encouraged the use of hired advocates who would present the defendant’s case. In such a system, the power and
presence of the advocate took on much more significance, and style (i.e., delivery) began to assume at least as great a role in the advocate’s ability to persuade the jury. This brief summary does not do justice to Goldberg’s arguments; suffice it to say that he sets a very high standard.

Melton’s “School, Stage, Salon: Musical Cultures in Haydn’s Vienna” focuses on the Baroque Catholic culture that shaped the three cultural stages on which Haydn and his music were to be found. Melton’s opening discussion of the Austrian school system makes clear that Haydn would have had little, if any, exposure to classical rhetoric, though he never makes that point explicitly. During the 1730s and 1740s, before the educational reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, parish schools in Austria rarely taught reading and writing, focusing instead on oral instruction in the Catechism and in music, so that the students would be able to perform in church when needed (pp. 83–84). Throughout the essay, Melton attempts to tie various aspects of Haydn’s style to his environment—his attentiveness to his audience to his reading of Mattheson and Addison; his fabled wit and playfulness to his early collaboration with the comic actor Johann Joseph Felix Kurz; and so forth—connections that sometimes seem strained. His essay suffers from a smattering of typos and errors: the equating of six kreuzer with ten gulden (p. 95; one gulden equaled sixty kreuzer); the date
of 1776 instead of 1766 for the marriage of Franz and Caroline von Greiner (p. 104); and the assertion that the peak years of Greiner’s salon, which he gives as 1772–1774, coincided with Haydn’s *Sturm und Drang* and the “notably eccentric turn” of his music (p. 105). Of the essay’s three sections, the one on schools is the most enlightening.

The other two “Background” chapters have a more theoretical bent. “*Ut Rhetorica Artes*” by Timothy Erwin addresses the role rhetoric played as a common element among the sister arts, at least in theory. He frames his argument as a contest between rhetoric and empiricism, which he believes encourages separation of the arts (though he never explains why), and devotes much of the article to descriptions and explications of various examples of rhetoric’s application to poetry, painting, and literature. His arguments are not easy to follow, in part because his perspective seems to shift with each bit of information, so that his conclusion speaks of the rhetorical and aesthetic perspectives on art, with Haydn (brought in for a cameo appearance) as a prime example of the rhetorical approach.

Bonds continues in the aesthetic vein in his “Rhetoric versus Truth: Listening to Haydn in the Age of Beethoven,” partly drawn from his 2006 book, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of*
Beethoven. He argues that in the early nineteenth century, when the mode of listening shifted away from the idea of a musical work as an oration or a conversation to an “object of contemplation,” listeners began to hear Haydn’s music differently (p. 112). Thus the very thing that made eighteenth-century listeners admire him—the intelligibility of his music and the clarity of its rhetorical argument—damned him in the eyes and ears of the nineteenth century, when accessibility was equated with mere popular entertainment. As Bonds points out, most of us still listen with nineteenth-century ears, so that, whether or not one buys into all of the rhetorical arguments in this volume, at least some attention to the subject should help unlock some of the delights in Haydn’s music.

Somfai, the only skeptic among the writers of the “Foreground,” begins his “Clever Orator versus Bold Innovator” with “an excusatio,” for he intends to play devil’s advocate. He poses two questions: First, did Haydn consciously use rhetorical techniques, and do the “gestures, surprises, baffling novelties need to be explained in terms of another art altogether?” Second, whether the “lengthy and fatiguing search not only for figures but for the presence of a special rhetorical narrative is relevant for performers, and through them, for listeners to Haydn’s music” (p. 214). He answers the second with a
resounding yes, referring to Tom Beghin’s performances, though he points out that their success is not solely the result of a rhetorical interpretation, but continues to have doubts (as do I) about the first. He questions whether Haydn intended his performers to understand their parts rhetorically, choosing the genre of the string quartet as a test case and observing that the annotations in the parts of his string quartets from Op. 20 on are all strictly musical. Though he certainly agrees that the music does often seem to present a masterful oration, he believes that the search for figures might actually distract the performer from a meticulous reading of Haydn’s musical instructions: “By focusing on speechlike aspects of performance, we risk underrating the amount and the significance of those constituents of Haydn’s style that were invented precisely to overrule natural speech: the articulation and rhetorical flow of a musical piece” (p. 228).

Beghin’s “‘Delivery, Delivery, Delivery!’: Crowning the Rhetorical Process of Haydn’s Keyboard Sonatas” and Webster’s “The Rhetoric of Improvisation in Haydn’s Keyboard Music” both address the many improvisatory-like passages found in Haydn’s keyboard music. Beghin focuses on the delivery part of the oration process, finding clues in the music, discussing at length a dubitatio in the first movement of Hob. XVI:49 that occurs when the
harmonic train momentarily derails (the DVD gives his rendition of the moment). Though his performance is convincing and witty, I have myself interpreted the sonata in similar fashion without thinking of a rhetorical figure, finding my inspiration, à la Somfai, in the flow of the music. He does make a convincing argument that the later Haydn sonatas can be read as giving guidelines about rhetorical improvisation to the largely female amateurs that were buying his sonata prints. Webster identifies three types of improvisatory rhetoric: 1) written-out passages that mimic normally improvised places like cadenzas, 2) general features of the style related to improvisation (toccata-like style), and 3) the improvisatory style used as a rhetorical device indicating confusion or freedom and the like. The first two would seem to stretch the use of the term “rhetoric” to the breaking point, and in fact Webster’s understanding seems to relate music to oratory because they are both performative arts in time that mean to move or persuade. He argues persuasively that these improvisatory-like passages in fact become a type of *topos* and wants us to recognize Haydn’s “ethical and rhetorical seriousness” (p. 211) as a companion to the appreciation of his wit, which should lead to a “broader, more accurately differentiated, and more productive view of Haydn’s art” (p. 212).
Brown’s “The Poetry of Haydn’s Song’s” begins cleverly: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Enlightenment was not an age of successful lyric verse” (p. 229). He then proceeds to explore the perceived inadequacy of the poetry available to Haydn, asking first if there “are any structural reasons why Haydn and Mozart wrote so many operas but so few songs?” (p. 230). One could reasonably respond that the answer might lie not so much in the structure of the poetry as in the nature of musical society and commerce: because of their career paths, neither composer had artistic or financial reasons to churn out song collections. Nonetheless Brown finds Haydn’s taste to be “notably old fashioned” and wants to know if there “might be some continuity between his songs and his greater accomplishments?” (pp. 231–32). In Brown’s view the Anacreontic and sentimental verses Haydn set had little to commend them, and he claims that “‘Der kleine Bösewicht’ . . . pretends access to grand emotions,” but reduces passion “to a dabbling in feelings” amid a “general aura of indulgence and self-satisfaction” (p. 233). Particularly in comparison to romantic lyric poetry, which seems to be his standard, such verses “lack the kind of persuasive, individualized narrative or the highly profiled emotional situation that irradiates many romantic lieder,” citing Schubert’s “Die
Forelle” as having a “particularized setting, a cumulative force, and a psychological acuity” missing from Haydn’s songs (p. 237). Toward the end of the chapter Brown does attempt to find a way to more appropriate criteria: “But Enlightenment conventions can be redeemed by taking seriously their many tactics of avoidance” (p. 238), and “Poetry like this indeed transcends subjectivity; it suppresses rather than expresses genuine emotion. Lacking sublimity, its sublimations are easily overlooked; that is why it has been so widely ignored or condemned by fancies of romantic depth” (p. 239). But comments like this seem to damn with faint praise, so that his conclusion comes as a surprise: “Recent analysts properly remind us of the weight present even in Haydn, but his lightness represents a different cultural moment, with its own distinctive insights and pleasures. If we deny or depreciate them, we sacrifice both a part of our culture and a part of ourselves” (p. 248). I heartily concur and only wished that the essay had helped us see those pleasures.

Richard’s excellent “Haydn’s London Trios and the Rhetoric of the Grotesque” also looks at one era’s concepts and ideas viewed through the lens of another, but in a more appropriate and productive fashion. In her opening gambit, she discusses the passacaglia-like two-part counterpoint
that opens the second movement of the Trio in E Major, Hob. XV:28 as evoking a “recollected baroque” (p. 252) made especially jarring and unsettling by the interpolated lyrical galant sections. In her view this movement “pushes the limits of rhetoric, exploring new contexts for aesthetic value and musical meaning” (p. 258). She connects this use of the baroque topos to the eighteenth-century debate about the grotesque, whose distortions, interruptions, and seemingly random ornamentation placed it outside the normal rules of art. As such, its “fundamentally subversive” nature (p. 274) undermines the practices of conventional rhetoric. Commenting on other disruptive moments in the London Trios, Richards points out the English fascination with the grotesque and Haydn’s own interest in caricatures and exaggerated, dramatic facial expressions, concluding that “The grotesque collapses the opposition between the humorous and the serious, allowing for the childlike and ironical as well as the monstrous sublime; it is surely Haydn’s mode in the late, highly performative chamber music” (p. 280).

Sisman, long a proponent of Haydn’s use of rhetoric, takes the grandest conceptual view of the topic in her “Rhetorical Truth in Haydn’s Chamber Music: Genre, Tertiary Rhetoric, and the Opus 76 Quartets.” Drawing on
George Kennedy’s distinction between primary rhetoric (works that “speak a persuasive oral discourse”) and secondary rhetoric (those that can be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective). To these she adds “tertiary rhetoric” to cover “works that also speak intertextually to each other and only through each other to the audience” (p. 282). After traversing the arguments for Haydn’s own knowledge of rhetorical terms and processes and discussing how genres make differing uses of the various types of rhetoric, she begins her examination of tertiary rhetoric by declaring that “the choice of genre is a fundamentally rhetorical act, and its implications are profoundly musical” (p. 299). Though it is both difficult to argue against that point and (for me) difficult to determine its significance, Sisman does proceed to make a fascinating case for the intertextual conversation among the six works of Op. 76. After pointing out that the opus originally appeared as two sets of three quartets, she discovers various rhetorical threads connecting them. The bold noise-killer chords (the equivalent of one of Cicero’s *exordium* types, the *principium*) at the beginning of Op. 76/1 are called into question by the tranquil opening (Cicero’s *insinuation*) of Op. 76/4, which forecasts even more radical things to come (though quiet openings are not unknown in Haydn’s quartets or his symphonies). She finds that the finales of the first set “speak” to each other, as do the slow
movements of the second set and observes that the second-movement Fantasia of Op. 76/6 “asks that the invention of all other movements be reevaluated.” Her conclusion seems appropriate: “As Haydn’s posterity, we may experience the op. 76 quartets as persuasive primary rhetoric, we may analyze them as highly figured secondary rhetoric, and we may, finally, be privileged to overhear their own dialogue in tertiary rhetoric.” (p. 326).

In the “Coda” that follows the essays, Beghin and Goldberg remind us they never intended to advocate any particular position on rhetorical interpretations of Haydn’s music but wanted instead to widen the discussion. In this they have succeeded. Though I am still not quite convinced that Haydn actually composed with rhetorical tactics in his conscious (or even unconscious) mind, and am even less certain that eighteenth-century listeners would have understood his works as rhetorical presentations (as opposed to simply appreciating the surprise and variety), I join Somfai in thinking that if rhetoric gives us new ways to enjoy and appreciate eighteenth-century music, including Haydn’s, then so much the better. Both performers and listeners can benefit from analysis that seeks to explain and elucidate music’s charms and attractions, whatever they may be.
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1 Peter Hoyt, “The Classical Oration as a Model for Musical Form in the Eighteenth Century,” in Musikkonzepte—Konzepte der Musikwissenschaft, 2 vols. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 200), 26–35. For Somfai’s views, see below.


3 McVeigh and Hirschberg, 28.