

## Music, Measure, Time: an Introduction

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It is my pleasure to introduce the first session today, which features a presentation by Sarah Huebsch. Sarah recently gained her D.M. (Doctor of Music) degree in Early Music from Indiana University, and is active as a period oboist and as a scholar of early music and performance practice. We're extremely fortunate that Sarah has tapped into her network of musicians to bring some of them here to perform illustrations from her talk. (I'll let her introduce them.)

Before turning things over to Sarah, I thought I would take just a few minutes to provide a little additional context for her discussion. To be sure, the themes of the workshop could be (and to a certain extent probably were) tailor-made for musical matters: number, only to an extent, perhaps—but for a musician, the immediate meanings of “measure” and “scale” are practically reflexive: measure would involve a bar or a small, regularly marked span of music, and also the concept of meter; scale connotes most obviously a gamut or stepwise arrangement of a referential collection of pitches.

The story Sarah will tell involves the way musicians organized the temporal dimension of music, both in concept and in practice. In the middle of the eighteenth century, even such an apparently simple and crucial topic as the appropriate speed or pace of a composition (that is, its tempo) involved, in the absence of some shared means of measurement, a host of insider knowledge about musical character, note values, verbal descriptions, and meter. And as the life of such a composition radiates beyond the immediate geographical and temporal zone of its composition, this “insider knowledge,” a matter partly of judgment and taste, becomes even more fragile, its very richness as the site of personalization and freedom the grounds for contestation and loss.

The temporal dimension of music across the eighteenth century can be described through technical theories of rhythm and meter: the inheritance from medieval times of a system of durational relationships known as *mensuration*, which relates notes on the principle of *division* and subdivision of a tactus or beat (as Sarah will show)—a way of thinking already attenuated at the beginning of the eighteenth century and which was eventually replaced, in the later writings of Kirnberger, Schultz, and Koch from the 1770s and 1780s, by a conception based on *grouping*, as beats are collected to form measures, which are then organized into regular metric patterns by the cognitive action of the listener (this is the so-called “accent-theory” of meter). Theoretical interest in the late eighteenth century also started to focus not only on the rhythm of individual measures, but on the rhythm created by phrases themselves.

These shifts can be understood through the lens of wider conceptions of time, as authors such as Roger Grant have demonstrated (and Sarah will touch on some of these aspects too), but I would stress that they ought also to be framed within the massive shifts in *musical style* of the century.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, this is partly a matter of apparent temporality—the way that later music seems to be more evidently goal-directed, more “dramatic,” possessing an increasing clarity and stylization of phrasing. But to move from, say, Bach's well-known C major Prelude of 1720, with its single, irreducibly rich pattern of repeating arpeggios gracefully stretched across 35 measures, to something like Beethoven's “Grosse Fuge” a century later (a single movement

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Matthew Grant, *Beating Time and Measuring Music in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

weighing in at a monstrous 740 measures) is to be struck by sheer scale. Indeed, one recent influential formulation of late eighteenth-century sonata form describes the practice as a “feat of engineering, like a bridge ‘thrown out’ into space.”<sup>2</sup> Controlling these ever-larger spans of musical space was the business of the composer, and music theorists hastened to keep up. (And it is not beside the point to mention that the very first page of Beethoven’s fugue contains three changes of time signature and tempo marking, and a baffling and still-contentious notation practice for the main theme of the piece.)

Returning to the themes of the workshop, some of the questions raised by Sarah’s presentation might be described through issues of personalization and standardization, through the dissemination of cultural knowledge and oral traditions across space and time, through anxiety over the loss of access to former ways of doing things, through the “tyranny of number” (in the form of metronome markings), and the challenges of “scaling up.”

There’s one final point I’d like to make, before handing over to Sarah and her band of merry musicians. And that is that, while a music theorist has the luxury of eternally mulling and deferring judgment, a practical musician has to *choose*. The question of tempo, to return to my initial example, is a very immediate and consequential one. Leopold Mozart, in his treatise on violin performance (a classic and influential text written around the same time as Quantz’s), writes that choice of tempo is the thing “by which the true worth of a musician can be recognized without fail.” Who, he says, “will contradict me if I count this among the chiefest perfections in the art of music?”<sup>3</sup> And it is especially in this light, as a practical, performing musician, that Sarah will be able to offer us her insights, as she explains the delicate matter of bringing the dead score to life.

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<sup>2</sup> James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Leopold Mozart, *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, trans. Editha Knocker, second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 33.