

ROBERT S. HATTEN

THE ROLE OF TEXTURE IN THE EXPRESSION
OF MUSICAL EMOTION:
THE MENUET FROM BACH'S PARTITA NO. 4 IN D MAJOR,
BWV 828

Dedicated with admiration and friendship to Eero Tarasti

My interest in texture stems from my work on *virtual agency* (Hatten 2018)—specifically, how multiple voices can either merge or divide into individual virtual agents—and *emotion*—specifically, how the various strands of the texture merge or interact to create what I call *melos*, or the primary level of expressive attending, as embodied in a virtual agent. In turn, virtual agents take on roles as virtual actors, and they can also interact as if they were parts of a single virtual subjectivity, with which we as listeners identify during the course of an unfolding psychic journey.

Texture has risen to a level of theoretical significance primarily in studies of twentieth-century music—from the collages of Ives to the pointillism of Webern and Stockhausen, and from the clusters of Cowell to the sonorism of Penderecki and the micropolyphony of Ligeti. But this oft-neglected category has recently been receiving the attention it deserves with respect to earlier styles. For example, Megan Kaes Long, in *Hearing Homophony: Tonal Expectation at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century* (Long 2020, 45), defines a category of “homorhythmic polyphony” as found in the part songs of the late Renaissance, which she explains as a significant factor in the development of tonality: syllabic text setting demanded a faster harmonic rhythm, with phrases

ROBERT S. HATTEN, Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin; e-mail: rohatten@austin.utexas.edu; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5350-952X>.

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grouped into longer time spans and supporting a goal-directed melody moving clearly from cadence to cadence. Joel Lester notes Bach's use of textural changes in the "Et expecto" from the B-minor Mass to mark striking harmonic or tonal shifts.

Joanna Frymoyer, although concentrating in her dissertation on music from 1890 through 1920, examines how we have conceived of texture as an analytical tool—not just by default in attempts to cope with the complexities of modern music, but as a necessary, synthetic complement to more analytical approaches to earlier styles. She draws on my notions of style competency, style growth and change, and markedness to examine texture through the lens of topic theory. In her interest in texture as semiotic, she also cites the groundbreaking article by Janet Levy, "Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music". And she offers her own definition of texture that goes far beyond the more quantitative approach to lines and densities offered by Wallace Berry in his *Structural Functions in Music*. As seen in table 1, Frymoyer conceives of texture from a more cognitive, hierarchical perspective as "the composite effect of musical parameters interacting and vying with one another for the listener's attention in the totality of a listening experience" (2012, 16).

My own approach to texture is informed by my experience as both listener and performer; expressive interpretation at the keyboard depends on the nuanced shading of multiple voices or strands in order to create a sonic composite that adequately exemplifies the functional interaction of those lines. I have chosen the Partita in D major since it exhibits an extraordinary textural variety that, as I will demonstrate, signals greater expressive complexity. Bach appears to be intrigued by the tropological blending of *learned* (more polyphonic) and *galant* (more homophonic) styles. In my investigation, however, I share with Megan Long a concern for moving beyond a simple opposition between polyphonic and homophonic categories; I also share with Joanna Frymoyer a concern for interpreting texture as a composite that *evolves* through a work. Thus, my working definition of texture (table 1) is "the *functional interaction* of *coordinated lines/voices* with respect to their *disposition* as they *evolve* in support of the *expressive trajectory* of a musical movement/work. In the Partita's dances, the hoary doctrine of a single affect for a movement in a single meter and rhythmic texture gives way to an extraordinary panoply of textural effects that contribute to a far richer emotional experience.

Table 1. Two complementary definitions of musical texture

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | “The composite effect of <i>musical parameters</i> interacting and vying with one another for the listener’s attention in the totality of a listening experience.” (Frymoyer 2012, 16) |
| 2 | “The functional interaction of <i>coordinated lines/voices</i> with respect to their disposition as <i>they evolve in support of the expressive trajectory</i> of a musical movement or work.” (Hatten) |

As outlined in table 2, the Partita begins with a topical French Overture in two parts—a monumental, double-dotted opening in cut-time followed by an extended fugal movement in 9/8, topically alluding to a gigue. The standard sequence of dances—Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue—is here enhanced with the insertion of two *galant* types, the Aria and the Menuet. I will concentrate on the shortest movement, the Menuet, to show how it exhibits *interior* textural development (i.e., not just those shifts in texture that mark larger formal or sectional boundaries, as found in toccatas or fantasias).

In his earlier French suites, Bach had already incorporated learned enhancements of *galant* dances. For example, both the Gavotte and the Loure from the G-major French Suite feature imitative counterpoint enriching their stylized dance character. But the Menuet of the D-major Partita exhibits a considerable advance in textural play that moves beyond a consistent blend of *galant* and learned styles toward what I will characterize as “textural developing variation.” The Menuet is a movement for which a generic title provides only a starting point for freer exploration, creating in effect a distinctive character piece.

Table 2. Outline of movements from Bach, Partita no. 4 in D major, BWV 828

| Title | Topic /Texture | Meter | (suggested tempo) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| Overture | French overture topic | \mathcal{C} | (stately but not <i>Grave</i>) |
| | | 9/8 fuge | (moderate; fast 16ths) |
| | | cf. <i>Partita no. 2: Sinfonia C, Grave adagio // andante // allegro/adagio // 3/4 fuge</i> | |
| Allemande | Italianate aria topic | C | (moderately slow; subdivisions from 8ths to 16ths, 32nds) |
| Courante | imitative devel. var | 3/2 with implied 6/4; 5/4 hemiola | (moderate; 8ths to 16ths) |

| | | | |
|---------------|---------------------|------|---|
| Aria | hocket concertante | 2/4 | (fast; subdivisions in 16ths) |
| Sarabande | marked motto | 3/4 | (very slow; walking 8ths; 16ths to 32nds) |
| Menuet | textural devel. var | 3/4 | (lively; duple vs triple subdivisions) |
| Gigue | fugal devel. var | 9/16 | (faster than 9/8, but no subdivisions) |

MENUET

The Menuet, appearing just before the final Gigue, is in typical 3/4 meter, but rather than embodying a courtly or stately character, it is playful and witty, implying a faster tempo. Edith Picht-Axenfeld, in her commentary to the Wiener Urtext edition used here, describes it as “lively” (2004, 148). Marked triplet divisions (m. 3) quickly emerge in competition with the initially unmarked, duple eighth-note divisions. Gestural leaps are frequent and saucy enough to suggest the influence of those comic operatic dancers known as *grottesca* for their intentional awkward leaps, in opposition to the more refined moves of classical dance troupes.¹

The opposition of duple and triple subdivisions within the theme is enhanced by a marked textural opposition that is striking because it is *also* internal to the theme. The first two bars feature a melody, a counter-figure in the tenor, and a slower bass line. When the triplets emerge in m. 3 as a continuational response, they hint at the “spinning forth” or *Fortspinnung* that follows an initial thematic statement. The texture also shifts to thicker accompanimental chords in 3 and 4 voices. But the initial texture returns for the cadence in m. 4, effecting a complementary textural “resolution”.

With the varied repetition of this four-bar theme, the tenor and bass take on a more contrapuntal relationship, complementing the foregrounded melody. And the marked appearance of an open fifth in m. 5 alludes to a pastoral drone. This witty topical allusion is followed by what sounds like laughter in

¹ Bach may have witnessed *grottesca* dancers in comic opera performances which he may have observed during his visit to the court in Dresden in 1717, the year of his abortive organ contest with Marchand, when, according to Christoph Wolff, “Bach was able to get a feel for the vibrant, rich, abundant musical life at the electoral Saxon and royal Polish court of Dresden, a European cultural center on a scale far beyond anything he had known before” (2000, 183). He notes that the Dresden court supported, at great expense, an Italian opera company (183).

the bass (the linear eighth-note descent).² The texture for the triplets in m. 7 extends a contrary motion wedge, with the lower two voices coordinated in a series of *grottesca* leaps. The dotted rhythms in the bass are *assimilated* to the triplets above (i.e., each bass sixteenth in m. 7 is sounded simultaneously with each third triplet in the soprano).

However, the opposition between duple and triple rhythms should always be respected when *successively* presented, which is clear from their systematic alternation measure by measure after the double bar in mm. 9–12. Here, texture is *also* oppositional: first monophonic, then a mirroring two-voice wedge, back to monophonic, and then back to two voices, with the bass leading to the next passage. However, starting in m. 13, the music features continuous triplets (in sequential patterns for 7 bars to a cadence), clearly accompanied by 2- or 3-voice chords. This “spinning forth” of the triplets, only suggested in m. 3, is here fulfilled with an extended *Fortspinnung* that modulates sequentially to a medial cadence in B minor at m. 20.

In m. 21, the theme appears to return, but down an octave and still needing to return from B minor to D major. For two measures, the original duple divisions are in yet another textural disposition: melody on top, pedal D in the middle, and contrapuntal bass below. The bass now takes on a more leading, melodic role in its second bar (m. 22), and Bach has indicated this subtlety with a full-bar slur.³ The upper voice fills out (through arpeggiation in m. 22) a modulatory V7/IV chord in D. But the triplet-filled third bar of this phrase (m. 23) is now expanded (m. 24) to include triplets in what would correspond to the third and *fourth* bars of the theme, and the bass has shifted to incorporate the dotted rhythms from bar 7. Furthermore, the wedge-like expansion and contraction in mm. 23–24 prolongs the balance between contrapuntal parts. Thus, this (premature) return features ongoing developing variation of both theme *and* texture.

² Joan Grimalt (2014; 2020, 324) offers arguments and examples of laughter as a musical topic.

³ Slurs are remarkably rare in the suites; thus, Bach may have intended this slur to signal a brief thematic role for this lower voice; the unbroken continuity of this measure in the bass then shifts to non-legato dotted rhythms in the next two measures, yet another (articulatory) nuance in the developing texture of this phrase.

Menuet

phrase-internal textural change

P5 "drone" "laughter"

7 grotesca leaps

9 oppositional textures ... 10

13

18

20 b: V-I

21 D: V7/IV

23 extended triplets

26 developing return (textural play)

20 thematic return in b minor

21 melodic bass

25 tonal return in D major

28 closural 8ve texture

Example 1. Menuet from Bach, Partita no. 4 in D major, BWV 828

The textural variants of this tonally "false return" also support the modulation to a climactic thematic return in D major for what one might also expect to be a definitive four-bar return of the theme. But texture continues to develop along with theme: in the first bar, the left hand's chords are an emphatic formal punctuation of the return; the triplets now invade the *second* bar, in the bass,

as the chords migrate to the right hand; and the third bar switches triplets and chords between the hands in textural inversion—a freer *textural exchange* instead of a stricter thematic *Stimmtausch*. The final bar enhances the melodic cadence on a sustained D with harmonic fill, as the tenor’s 4–3 cadential suspension complements an arpeggiated fill of the harmony. With this last, contrapuntal flourish, the lower voices merge into an octave close on D—thereby achieving a *textural* as well as a *tonal* resolution.

To summarize, Bach has exploited multiple textures to highlight both the individual character and the various developmental stages of his four-bar *galant* theme. After the double-bar, the textural play continues in an ongoing developing variation. Although the tonal and formal structure of the Menuet is preserved, texture is not incidental but may be understood as fulfilling both structural and expressive roles. The play of textural oppositions is in effect a basic premise for this freely conceived dance.⁴ In turn, our interpretation will exceed such simplistic descriptive labels as “courtly” or “comic”. Instead, we are led to experience a far more complex expressive journey—one that words can only begin to suggest. But the performer can capture the verve of these subtle nuances, thereby enhancing a virtual agential experience of the Menuet as an ongoing, virtual emotional journey.

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⁴ Peter Williams notes that in the third partita, in A minor, Bach’s change of title for the Minuet to Burlesca “must imply something new, either in the piece itself or in the way it is meant to be played” (2016, 320). He further notes how in the Partitas an occasional dance may “begin to anticipate the character pieces ... of a later period” (320). Here, I would add that texture provides the clue for that difference, even without a change from the conventional title of Menuet.

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Summary

Musical texture is a complex sign based on the functional interrelationship of all the "voices" in a given segment of music. In Bach's era, textural categories were oppositionally conceived as primarily *homophonic* (block-chordal, or melody with chordal accompaniment) vs. *polyphonic* (linear-contrapuntal, often imitative). However, the Partitas, comprising the third and most compositionally advanced collection of his keyboard suites, exhibit an unusual variety of textures, both shifts among textures and imaginative blends of textural types. Since earlier suite dances are typically based on a single texture, Bach's textural play suggests a deeper expressive motivation. I demonstrate how, in the Menuet from the Partita, Bach pioneers both textural contrast within phrases and an ongoing developing variation of texture to create a more highly nuanced expressive trajectory.

Keywords: Bach; musical texture; developing variation; topics; emotion