

Johann Adolph Scheibe, Critischer Musikus (Leipzig: 1745), pages 595-602, 619-630

ESSAY 65 -- Tuesday, 24 November, 1739

[introductory material omitted . . .]

Ever since operas achieved their full maturity in Italy, composers have been accustomed to introduce them with a type of instrumental piece that, before the curtain is raised, prepares the listeners in a pleasant and ingenious manner for the whole opera. These pieces are called symphonies. Only rather recently, however, have they been introduced here in Germany, where they have achieved, I think I may say, their greatest perfection. Although they really owe their origin to opera, symphonies have not been restricted to opera alone, but, on account of their beauty, have been employed to good effect and general satisfaction for all sorts of vocal works, outside the theater and even in church, and further without connection to any vocal work at all but alone as regular instrumental pieces in the chamber. The symphony, as it exists today, makes a particularly deep impression [Nachdruck], and a skillful composer can express in a symphony, without too much trouble and in the clearest and most pleasing manner, all the affects [Affecten], all the passions and all the other things that can only be imagined in music.

[. . . paragraph omitted on prior literature . . .]

Symphonies may be categorized into three genres [Gattungen]: namely those that are used for church music, those for theatrical and other sorts of vocal works, and finally those that are purely and exclusively instrumental works without reference to any vocal work at all. This I have pointed out already above. Thus, there are church [geistliche] symphonies, theater symphonies and chamber symphonies. All symphonies that are used with vocal music ought to fit the vocal works for which they were composed. Consequently, they should be composed in the same style [Schreibart] as the piece to which they belong. However, symphonies that are composed without such a purpose have a different character, as will be seen expressly in what follows.

In the old days symphonies took an almost entirely different form. They differed greatly from modern symphonies in the character of both melody and harmony and also in the external arrangement of the order of movements. Melody was not as free, not as natural and consequently not as lively and flowing. People were more concerned with firm and thorough harmonic development [Ausführung]. As a result symphonies took more skill and labor to compose. With these properties it was impossible for them to achieve the emotional effects [Affekt] that are so characteristic of modern symphonies. They were neither so pleasing nor so moving and expressive as those of today. The observance of rules [Zwang] was too strong for nature to have any latitude. Involved harmonic labor was the thing that hindered this in particular. And in the process, melody and the purity of song were suppressed. Thus these symphonies were not adept at expressing and achieving the things that today's symphonies can, the things that constitute the symphony's real and true character.

Since in former times composers took pains to demonstrate their artistry at harmony in such works, they had to throw in all sorts of harmonic contrivances. So their symphonies were strewn with counterpoint, fugues, canons and other sorts of contrived imitations. The instruments wound in and around one another, and [never?] unraveled the multitude of links that bound them. [Die Instrumente flochten sich in einander, und löseten sich [nie?] durch allerhand Bindungen unter sich ab.] Under these conditions, how could anyone write a straightforward, flowing melody?

Contrast this to symphonies in their modern-day form. It is easy to see how superior they now are. Because their melodies are flowing, expressive and lively, being born of Nature alone, other, yet more agreeable consequences follow. And if a composer, in a serious symphony, introduces a stricter and more intricate harmony or perhaps even an imitation, still the shape of the whole symphony and the use of contrasting passages afterwards suffice to make it clear that such things are meant to highlight the melody and make its natural beauty yet clearer and more seemly by means of artistic contrast. It is in our symphonies that one sees in a very particular way how necessary melody is. It is melody that makes them beautiful, moving, impressive and sublime. It is melody that allows us to reveal in advance to the listeners, without words and without any other explanation, those things that they will later see more explicitly and more clearly. It is melody therefore that enables the composer to arouse and express all affects [Affekten] and all passions. This is proof positive that melody is the most superior and the most excellent aspect of music, and that it ought vastly to be preferred to harmony, which people nonetheless persist in praising even though it has none of the advantages that belong to melody alone.

[Discussion of church symphonies omitted]

[ESSAY 66 omitted – Discussion of opera symphonies]

[ESSAY 67 omitted – Discussion of symphonies for spoken theater]

ESSAY 68 -- Tuesday, 15 December, 1739

Today I finally come to the third type of symphonies that go with poetic works, namely those that are used with vocal works belonging to the chamber style, for example serenades, "dramate" and other kinds of major epic cantatas.

In general it should be said that these symphonies ought to correspond to the nature [Einrichtung] of the vocal works which they precede and thus that the rules governing the styles [Schreibarten] of those pieces must be observed. All that I said in several previous essays about the various styles of these vocal works applies, therefore, to their symphonies. Whatever applies to vocal works in the theatrical style also applies to symphonies in the theatrical style, as I described them in my 66th essay. However, when the vocal work itself is not written in the theatrical style, then the symphony too requires a somewhat different approach [Einrichtung],

one that comes closer to the chamber style. I want to discuss these last symphonies in somewhat more detail, because they involve several things that we have not previously had an opportunity to observe.

Since the characteristics of a vocal work in the chamber style are very different from those of a vocal work for the theater, as my discussion of these two kinds of vocal works pointed out, it is also necessary to distinguish the two sorts of symphonies from one another. Chamber symphonies demand greater development of the harmonies [harmonischer Ausarbeitung], and altogether more in the way of harmony and development and expressiveness [Nachdruck]. Such a symphony must be worked out with more voices and more ingenuity [Kunst] than a theater symphony. The composer has to give the middle voices more to do and must let them emerge now and then from the texture in an artful manner. It is obvious that a symphony that goes with a piece that has been composed for the birthday celebration of a great lord must be much grander and more extensively worked out than a symphony that has been composed for an opera. The latter, to be sure, requires just as much spirit [Feuer] but not so much artifice as the former. And thus the latter cannot be as intricate either. If a splendid piece of chamber music performed at the aforementioned or a similar occasion, is to have its effect, it cannot be nearly so flowing and free as an opera symphony. In the [theater symphony] the [rules of] harmony do not have to be so strictly observed. Free-flowing, beautiful and graceful melody is more important here, and these would be spoiled and obscured by artful intricacies in the middle voices. Consequently, in a theater, a composer must use all the means at his disposal to make his melody and his music clear and pleasing. This is so principally because [in such a hall] the orchestra itself comes across clear and loud and the notes do not die away very much. On the other hand, in a large room with a well-stocked banquet table surrounded by a large number of people, a symphony will never have much of an effect unless it is amplified [gehoben] by a full and loud harmony [Harmonie] as well as lively, forceful [nachdrücklich] activity in the middle voices. The notes die away too rapidly and disappear too soon in this situation. Thus the composer is obliged to find a means of overcoming this difficulty: and this is a clear and forceful [nachdrücklich] harmony. This prevents the notes from dissipating themselves so rapidly, and helps them reach the listeners with greater force. These remarks, however, do not supersede my comments on the general characteristics of symphonies as I explained them in Essay 65. A composer must not devote all his energies to elaborating his harmony with all sorts of artifices while he neglects the melody. By no means! In symphonies of all types he must give particular attention to melody. If a graceful [freie] melody is lacking, the symphony is deprived of its greatest beauty, no matter how carefully and splendidly its harmonic artifices are worked out.

[. . . summary paragraph omitted . . .]

Now I have described all symphonies that are written for vocal works or for theatrical purposes. All that is left is for me to speak a bit about those symphonies that are used as purely instrumental pieces, without any connection to vocal works or to ensuing theatrical action. These are properly called "chamber symphonies."

Since these pieces have very different purposes from those previously discussed, they

admit greater freedom in their composition, both as regards invention and in style. The composer's spirit [Feuer] is the single most important thing that animates such symphonies. Here he can present his own ideas just as he pleases and just as the natural characteristics of the piece itself require. He is not in the least constrained. The liveliness of his spirit and his skill in discovering and animating a melody are the only rules he needs to follow. The only exception is that he must maintain a certain orderliness in presentation that is necessary in all melodies and without which no piece of music can be beautiful, an orderliness that itself demonstrates genuine and noble liveliness of spirit. After all, a piece in which no rules at all are followed and in which not even the slightest order prevails can have no effect whatsoever. A composer shows off his spirit and his skill best by observing those rules that have been discovered to link thoughts to one another and to present them clearly. In addition [he must observe] the general rules of musical composition that govern the use of intervals and the correctness [Reinigkeit] of the harmonic accompaniment. These are important in making a melody, indeed any piece of music, presentable and in giving it its effect. Now I must add some observations about symphonies.

Symphonies in general may be constructed in two ways. A composer may divide a movement into distinct segments [Clauseln] or separate parts, or he may construct his symphony without separate segments, letting the movement continue uninterrupted, without any distinct separation of first from second part, all the way to the principal cadence [Hauptschluss]. Thus, one finds both lively, rapid movements and slow movements without any noticeable division and without repetition of the first part.

When a movement is divided into two parts and consists of separate segments, then each part needs to have its own cohesion. The composer begins with a principal idea [Haupterfindung] and follows it with various related ideas [Nebensätzen], some of them flowing from the original idea, others merely linked to it, until he reaches another clearly established tonality, in which he can make a cadence. Thus, a fast movement of a symphony that begins in a major key must cadence in the fifth of that key. If the symphony begins in the minor, on the other hand, the first part ends best in the key of the third, although it is also possible to cadence at the fifth. The cadence, however, must be clear and unequivocal and must seem necessary in the progression of the movement, so that the repetition of this part will sound pleasing and natural. The second section begins again with the principal idea, and in the working out [Ausführung] of this idea it follows quite precisely the layout [Beschaffenheit] and the thoughts of the first part. The composer has the freedom, however, to change key more than once in the middle of this section and thus to move into other keys and cadence. However, he must manage things so that he returns at last in a lively and unforced manner to the principal key again, in which the second section can end. The more clever and unexpected twists and turns [Fälle und Gedanken] he can invent, the livelier and more pleasing his symphony will be. However, it takes a lot of practice, deep insight into the nature of melody and no uncommon skill to link everything seamlessly and naturally and to reconcile even the most far-fetched twists and turns with the principal idea. Unexpected twists must surprise the listener and seem entirely unpremeditated; and then, before the listener really realizes what has happened, they must be linked to and united with the principal idea. What I am pointing out here is the greatest of all virtues in a symphony, because it depends on nothing but the natural spirit of the composer and

on his experience in the art of composition.

I need to point out one further thing that makes symphonies pleasing, natural and flowing and also gives melodies an appropriate form and a special strength [eine geziemende Ordnung und eine besondere Stärke]. I am talking about paying precise attention to phrase structure [Rhythmus], that is, maintaining an orderly succession of measures. If the principal idea or principal melody consists of an even number of measures, all succeeding phrases [Sätze] and all associated melodies should maintain the same arrangement. If this order is interrupted, such an interruption needs to be clearly differentiated, and it must be introduced only in special circumstances as something foreign and unusual. Finally the initial order must be introduced again afterwards, so that the effect of the intervening foreign phrases is resolved.

[. . . paragraph omitted comparing musical phrase structure to phrase structure in poetry]

With regard to those symphonies that proceed without any division all the way to the final cadence [Hauptschluss], it should be observed that the order of the ideas and their cohesion need to hang together even more closely. Thus the first cadence [Cadenz] should not be given as much weight as in the previously discussed symphonies, because the progression of phrases and melodies is continued immediately. In addition, these symphonies have to be developed somewhat more expansively, and they contain fewer alterations of musical ideas. The composer must pay careful attention to making them flowing and clear and also to linking all the phrases and the melodies strongly to one another. As regards phrase structure, the same remark applies that I already made for the first type of symphonies. However, in this case the phrase ends and the final segments of the melodies cannot be so very explicit, because they hang together more closely and are bounded by one another. In addition, because the phrases or the melodic segments [Clauseln] are more expansive, the composer must take all the more care to make them clear and pleasing to the ear, despite their close links with one another. He must also be careful not to let the close connection that results from the uninterrupted succession [of phrases] spoil the proportions [of the piece], which bind all the parts [Glieder] and all the melodic segments together. And finally it should be observed in general that all rapid movements should sound bright, new and flowing, while slow movements, on the other hand, should be tender and moving. The last movement, which is the third in a symphony, needs to have a very nimble [flüchtig] character, so that it can be played as rapidly as possible. The more quickly a movement is to be played, however, the more exact the order, the proportion of measures and the phrase rhythm have to be. All quick movements that neglect this observation, become confused and incomprehensible and amount to no more than a wild bustle in which no melody at all can be heard.

All that I have pointed out up to now applies to almost all symphonies, whether they involve concertante instruments or not [sie mögen nun concertirend, oder nicht concertirend seyn]. For composers also write symphonies also with concertante instruments. About these I need to say a couple of things.

It is well known that a symphony is something different from a regular instrumental

concerto, and thus it is easy to understand that in a symphony with concertante instruments [concertirende Symphonie], those instruments cannot alternate in the same manner as in ordinary concertos. They must distinguish themselves only now and then in occasional songful phrases. They should be heard [erscheinen] only in the distance, in a skillful alternation that enhances the liveliness of the piece. Thus, they should not play by themselves for a long time, and, when they do play, they should only project a little more strongly than the other instruments that are playing. This is a style peculiar to concert symphonies [Concertsymphonien], which are sometimes scored with concertante flutes or oboes and in which the composer must thus be careful not to write in a style more appropriate for concertos. Symphonies with trumpets and drums or with horns [Waldhörner] can be regarded as no more than ordinary four-part symphonies, because these instruments are added only for splendor or for reinforcement [Ausfüllung] and are not given any particularly prominent passages.

[. . . summary paragraph omitted . . .]