Guides to Bach-Phrasing --

I

Loud mutilates --
Sustained-Loud annihilates.

We can accomplish nothing with regard to Baroque phrasing until we realize that a chorus of our size and general vocal background is precisely and irredeemably the wrong instrument for the performance of Bach's vocal works. The very things which a great symphonic chorus can do natively and eloquently are the implacable enemies of Baroque sonority and texture.

—So, while we may study Bach's vocal masterpieces with pleasure, and with rewards to the mind and spirit otherwise unattainable, we do so in the constant danger of killing the things we love.

The well-disciplined symphony chorus has two notable musical characteristics: it has a potential for seamless sound, and it has a capacity for collective vocal heroism.

In the first instance, by the skillful overlapping of sectional dominances -- or by means as simple as "staggered breathing" -- the symphonic chorus is capable of producing phrases that seemingly never end. Moreover, while the maximum sonority of the symphony orchestra must be accomplished by the accumulation of new families of instruments -- with alterations in color and texture -- the crescendo of the symphonic chorus inherently is without seam or terrace. —And the smoothness of its diminuendo can supply a veiled expiration of sound which for most ears in most halls will be all but imperceptible.

In the second instance, given humanity's instinctual search for community, and today's fashions in vocal style, the urge towards collective vocal heroism already may be irreversible.

Today's market features for the masses the mike-to-mouth elephantiasis of hard-to-soft rock, while in the adjoining stall the upper classes drool over vocal tumescence in its natural state, paying outrageously for the semi-private consumption of voice production by the decibel. —And since most of human life -- from monasticism to ladies' bowling -- appears to be a quest for something or someone to "belong to," the chorus of massed voices is the primordial muse of "togetherness."
Should it be given, as in a Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, a text celebrating the Freude of Brüder-hood, the prospect of simultaneously hailing virtue, winning a team-gold in the Vocal Olympics, and whelming a symphonic juggernaut apparently un-hibits the most repressed of larynges, un-stints the most reluctant of volunteers and validates delusions of humongous vocal grandeur.

-But it's all bad -- for Bach.

Not seamlessness, but articularity,
Not union, but independence.

Not mass, but motion,
Not size, but function,
Not how much, but how skillful.

Not solidarity, but transparency,
Not with a bang, but a whisper.

II

The assignment in "Bach-phraseing" is to discover and "give a voice" to melodic function.

To approach the matter metaphorically, melody is a sort of musical energy; and the long Bach line is a "stream" of musical energy which experiences a variety of subsidiary conditions of motion and repose in its search for a final resting place.

In theory at least (but, I believe also, in potential actual sound) there are only three possible melodic functions:

1. Initiating -- or "departing from,"
2. Transmitting -- or "passing through,"
3. Concluding -- or "arriving at."

Of these three functions the middle one occasionally is missing altogether, so that -- under the "microscope" -- one frequently may find only "departing from" and "arriving at." On the other hand, one may discover from time to time a multiple of "passing throughs" between a "departing from" and an (however temporary) "arriving at."
One qualification: "Initiating," in one significant respect, is a misleading term. Obviously there has to be a beginning note to any melody. But, it is seldom in the Bach line, it seems to me, that the melody flows prodigally from the first note -- as though it were some sort of generating "spring" -- a source which originates, defines and dictates all that which is to follow. Rather, it is more nearly true in a theoretical sense -- as it is more productive in a practical sense -- that the final note is the generative one -- the destination toward which every other note flows. For me, it is the note of arrival -- together with the series of interim temporary reposes -- which more truly than the initiating note, helps us to discover function.

If, then, there are only three forms of melodic energy (or function) and if, even only occasionally, the middle one of these is absent, it follows that the long Bach line is a progressive accumulation of two- and three-note melodic cells or "syllables," at first combining to form four-, five- and six-note "words" and, at last, compounding into "qualifying phrases" and eventual "sentences." Our responsibility, as performers, is to discover and to sound these minutia of motion.

In an instrument substantially incapable of crescendo and diminuendo -- like the early pipe-organ (devoid of "expression" devices) -- the beginnings and endings of melodic "syllables" can be indicated only by cessation of sound, however momentary. Theoretically, if one were responsible only for a single-line melody, even were it composed of a steady stream of staccato eighth-notes, one could increase or decrease tempo at will, and thus make smaller or larger silences between notes to suggest interior "syllabic" groupings.

In point of fact, however, Bach's musical language is primarily a contrapuntal one, involving two to five, or even eight lines simultaneously, so that tempo changes which conceivably could make one line clearer or more expressive might at the same moment violate the clarity and expressivity of all other lines.

In performance, therefore, one is obliged to maintain generally a basic and constant pulse, within whose regularity one can suggest syllabic groupings, by varying what is called articulation: the nearly infinite scale of durations between sostenuto and staccato. (Larger durations of non-sound obviously equal more extended qualities of repose.)

Moreover, one never encounters, with Bach, melodic line with unrelieved reiterative pulse division. (An unending parade, for instance, of sixteenth notes.) Melodic line of Bach's quality and interest will always have a variety and balance of individual durations -- just as it will have variety of pitch and linear direction. (And, as will be noted later, extended duration -- even of notes of identical pitch -- will imply "arrival at" and momentary repose.)

The first of the ways, then, of shaping melodic "syllables" into "words," and "words" into "qualifying phrases," and "qualifying phrases" into "sentences," and "sentences" into "paragraphs," is to control the amount of silence between successive notes -- even to the minutia of employing numerous varieties and durations of staccato notes.
Most musical instruments, however, including the human voice, have the capability not only of producing pitches of shorter or longer duration, in quicker or slower tempi, but have also the capability of varying their amplitude -- of producing them loudly or quietly. And a subtle and delicate varying of dynamics can also be used to suggest the "syllabic sequence" of a musical line. The terms "subtle" and "delicate" are critical, because we are not concerned with the dramatic explosions of sound (or implosions of silence) characteristic of more homophonic, dramatic or exhibitionistic music. We are suggesting that miniscule and transitory crescendi and diminuendi can be used along with varieties of articulations, punctuation and silence to create the gathering web of tonal tracery which is Bach's genius and our delight. And we are cautioning ourselves that these inflections of dynamics must be of such subtlety that were we to add them personally to our vocal parts, we should probably exaggerate them -- and others certainly would.

III

Two questions remain:

First, how do we recognize these melodic "molecules," these two-, three-, or four-note syllables that should be grouped according to their initiating/transmitting/concluding functions? And second, is it possible to be more specific as to exactly how to "voice" them?

I - Recognition

1. In general -- weak-beat leads to strong-beat, weak part-of-beat leads to strong part-of-beat, and weak part-of-measure leads to strong part-of-measure. And the note of "arrival" is then punctuated by an appropriate "comma" of silence -- or near-silence.

This is the familiar "cross-bar" or "cross-beat" phrasing; and, while it is not unexceptionable, it is so frequently applicable that it may take the insistence of sequential repetition or persistent text-underlay to contradict it.

2. In general -- notes of short duration lead to notes of longer duration (after which, again, there is an implied "comma" of appropriate proportion.)

3. In general -- notes of diatonic or chromatic adjacency are to be understood as belonging to a common "syllabic cell," while "leaps" or "skips" more frequently will be found to imply seams or joints between cells. The interruption of tonal adjacency, therefore, frequently will signal the beginning of a new grouping, however minor or auxiliary. (Triads used as melodic cells -- as, for instance, the initiating motif of a fugue subject -- are obvious exceptions.)
4. Frequently, also -- change of melodic direction will be associated with the beginning of a new auxiliary grouping. It may be worthy of note here that the seam between two "syllables" identifiable only by change of direction seldom allows the luxury of a full "comma," unless the pivot point also coincides with a note of longer duration. Particularly in rapid and regular sequential accompaniment patterns, a sensitively placed staccato may have to suffice. Or, it is possible that this sort of obscure melodic syllabification can best be indicated only by subtle and transitory changes in dynamics.

To repeat: the four melodic conditions which aid in the recognition and performance of the subsidiary cells of a Bach line are:

2. Short durations moving towards -- and serving -- longer durations.
3. Interruption of melodic adjacency.

When more than one voice (or line) is present, however, it is important to recall that -- except in the case of final cadences -- the "commas" which signal the conclusion of melodic cells never can be allowed to slow tempo or delay subsequent pulse. Commas always must borrow their time from the cell which they conclude, not from the cell which follows. Otherwise, a chaotic dislocation and deformation of other voices will ensue.

To recapitulate:

Two of the guides to the cellular components of the Bach line are metric, and two are melodic.

Metrically:

1. So-called "weak"-beats (or portions thereof) are really the active portions of metrical function; they lead to the so-called "strong"-beats (or portions thereof) which are, in fact, elements of metrical repose.

(In this light would be phrased not , but rather .)
2. Shorter metrical units lead towards larger metrical units more frequently than the reverse.

(In this light would be phrased not, but rather )

Melodically:

3. Interruption of melodic adjacency frequently will imply a grouping.

(Thus, will seldom be phrased as above, but rather as )

4. Change of direction frequently will imply a grouping.

(Thus, will seldom be phrased as above, but rather as )
It will be noted in both of the melodic examples (3 and 4) that more than one principle of grouping is operative. (The "cross-beat/cross-bar" principle is involved in both.) Such multiplicity will be found to be true in all but a few actual instances. When two or three principles are involved, it not frequently happens that they will suggest different -- even contradictory -- groupings. One will then have to decide -- usually upon the basis of general texture or the movement of more important voices -- which principle will "rule."

The remaining question has to be with how these cells/syllables/molecules (These terms have been used interchangeably) are to be "voiced." And most of that question already has been answered indirectly, if not exhaustively.

The method most appropriate to both of the metrical principles is the use of actual cessation of sound, or a significant diminution thereof, to suggest what has been termed a "comma."

It also has been noted, particularly in the case of rapidly moving accompanimental sequences, that subtle crescendi and diminuendi can be used to suggest the cellular components of longer lines.

What has to be reiterated at this point is our opening text: "Loud mutilates... Sustained-Loud annihilates." Everything is improved by light, pointillistic non-sostenuto singing. Each section of the chorus must be absolutely precise as to pitch, time, vowel, timbre and dynamic; and no note -- including very long ones -- can be sustained in the sense of operatic vocalism. The more voices there are on a part, the less loud each voice can sing, and the more pointillistic (staccato) each pitch must be. Inversely, the fewer the number of voices assigned to each part the more "normal" and "soloistic" vocalism may be -- so long as one understands "normal" and "soloistic" as the sort of singing which can produce pitches of god-like precision and ineffable beauty at super-sonic speed and at a dynamic which is a declaration of dependence rather than a double-dare.

We should also acknowledge that part of our problem in the performance of Bach's sacred cantatas and oratorios is associated with text. This has no reference to enunciation, but rather to our interpretations of the Christian or Judeo-Christian scriptures -- personal or inherited. That is to say, if one is thoroughly convinced that "a mighty fortress is our God" should really be sung "a guided missile is the Lord" ("...marching as to war," then he may feel obliged to use his how-great-thou-art Voice. --But if "ein feste Burg" can be considered "an enduring citadel... a secure refuge... a comforting haven..." then one may view with sympathy and even thanks the ruminative, contemplative participation of neighboring voices, weaving strands of mutual comfort and hope.
In conclusion a word should be said concerning rehearsal techniques for the learning of Bach's works. In my experience, unless all rehearsal procedures derive from the desire to develop vocal lightness and "super-human" precision as regards pitch and articulation, one finds that he is defeated -- and defeats also the music -- by trying to clamp a battleship turbine on to the gondola of a lighter-than-air-balloon. Buoyant, facile, slightly-staccato singing on nonsense syllables -- after a reading or two employing the count-singing devices -- will build the necessary disciplines and musical texture -- and (in my experience) nothing else will. One adds text only late in the rehearsal process, and only after it has been carefully phonetically disciplined apart from the music.

I've just come upon a small spose.

S'pose for a moment that we could excise Weight-Lifting from the events of the Vocal Olympics -- and substitute Musical Feathers. S'pose the gold medal were given not for kilograms of decibels, but rather to the team which could keep afloat the greatest number of Musical Feathers. S'pose those feathers could pilot themselves lightly through Time and Tonal Space in the most exciting, elaborate and labyrinthine of contrapuntal maneuvers, never at less than the full speed of sound, and never obstructing, obscuring or deflecting other feathered rights of flight, until they finally floated to common rest in a scarcely audible millisecond of mutual fulfillment.

S'pose what this world really needs is a still small voice?

RS
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