

Andreas Metz*¹**Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland*
¹andreas.metz@uniarts.fi

Melodic Fluency in Keyboard Menuet Improvisation

ABSTRACT

Background

Galant-style keyboard improvisation, as it is currently practiced, relies largely on partimento bass-line realization exercises and diminution exercises involving idiomatic outer-voice patterns known as schemata. Schemata are particularly useful because they facilitate improvisation in a manner consistent with the stylistic conventions of the eighteenth century, provide a melodic framework for surface figurations, and can be combined to generate short pieces or entire sections of a longer movement. However, as useful as schemata are for the purpose of improvisation, they do not necessarily guarantee the kind of large-scale melodic continuity and direction (melodic fluency) that is often characteristic of composed rather than improvised music. In order to address the issue of melodic fluency and to provide melodic guidelines for keyboard menuet improvisation, the author highlights the relationship between schemata and large-scale melodic design in ten short menuets by C.P.E. Bach.

Robert Gjerdingen's discussion of the order of the various schemata in *Music in the Galant Style* (2007) indicates that large-scale melodic continuity and direction play a significant role in schemata-based composition and, by extension, galant-style improvisation. Gjerdingen observes that the proper disposition of the musical material (schemata) can be achieved among other techniques through the stepwise movement of the parts: 'A series of schemata could be imagined as beads on a mental string or cognitive thread—*il filo* [...]. This thread represents an impression of continuity, which can arise from simple succession, from various kinds of higher-level schemata, or from the quite low-level but nevertheless significant effects of musical meter and the stepwise movement of the parts' (Gjerdingen 2007, 375–6).

To support his claim, Gjerdingen discusses several short musical examples from Heinrich Christoph Koch's *Introductory Essay on Composition* (1793). These examples feature the type of stepwise melodic motion that occurs just beneath the musical surface, from one measure to the next or following measure, and involves between four and fourteen measures. This type of large-scale melodic motion strongly resonates with the notion of melodic fluency as defined by Heinrich Schenker in the first volume of *Counterpoint* (1910). Unlike Schenker's more developed notion of melodic fluency, this early notion involves neither the repeated application of the principle of melodic fluency to one and the same passage nor the concepts of the *Urlinie* or *Ursatz*. The present author relies on this early notion of melodic fluency to examine the relationship between schemata and large-scale melodic design.

Aims and repertoire studied

In order to provide melodic guidelines for keyboard menuet improvisation the author discusses the relationship between schemata, large-scale melodic design, and form in ten short menuets by C.P.E. Bach. Since the large-scale melodic paths of major and minor compositions usually differ, the author has chosen to examine menuets that are exclusively in the major mode. Also, to ensure that the menuets under consideration are not dependent in any way on preceding movements, as this might skew the analytical results, none of the selected menuets are of type 'Menuet II' or part of a multi-movement work such as a suite or sonata.

Methods

The author juxtaposes schema analyses with analyses of large-scale melodic motion based on the notion of melodic fluency as defined by Heinrich Schenker in the first volume of *Counterpoint* (1910).

Implications

The analytical results suggest that there are essentially three large-scale melodic paths (A, B, and C) that govern the choice and order of schemata in C.P.E. Bach's major-mode menuets. The numbers below refer to large-scale melodic events in the two reprises of C.P.E. Bach's menuets. The dashes indicate that the melodic motion in the opening measures of melodic paths B and C is not fixed.

Melodic path A:

||: 5-4-3-2 :||: 2, 3-2-1 :||

Melodic path B:

||: — , 6-5-4-3-2 :||: 2-3, 6-5-4-3-2-1 :||

||: — , 6-5-4-3-2 :||: 2 / 7, 6-5-4-3-2-1 :||

Melodic path C:

||: — , 3-2-1-7-6-5 :||: 5, 3-2-1 :||

||: — , 3-2-1-7-6-5 :||: 5, 5-4-3-2-1 :||

||: — , 3-2-1-7-6-5 :||: 7-1-2, 3-2-1 :||

Adherence to the above melodic paths will result in menuet improvisations that are not only melodically fluent but also stylistic. The analytical approach proposed here can be extended to menuets in the minor mode and other short self-standing instrumental genres of the galant period such as ariosos, andantes, and allegrettos.

Keywords

Improvisation, keyboard, menuet, C.P.E. Bach, melodic fluency, schemata.

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