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MATTHESON'S *HARMONY'S MONUMENT* THE TWELVE SUITES OF 1714:

CLUES TO THE EXECUTION OF RHYTHM IN GERMAN BAROQUE SUITES

By Colin Booth

If we compare Mattheson's portrait with those of some of his fellow-musicians, like Handel, Telemann, or Graupner, we can immediately see that he appears at home in their company - more so than alongside J.S. Bach, at least going by Bach's best-known depiction by Haussmann. Even Mattheson's fashionably ornate clothes contrast with Bach's sober black.

Indeed, Mattheson was an extrovert, and a multi-talented man: fluent in many languages, both ancient and modern, he was also a noted dancer, fencer, horseman, and fashionable beau. Undoubtedly good company, he was far from self-effacing, as is clear from his own voluminous writings - many of which centre upon himself. These accomplishments are more likely to make a man renowned in his own time, than revered by later generations.

Nevertheless, Mattheson's stated mission was to improve music in his native land, not just by performance and compositions of his own, but by recommendation, instruction, and discussion - hence his contributions to writing and teaching.

As a musician, he was precocious. In his teens he was not only a virtuoso organist, but also a soprano soloist in the Hamburg Opera. He graduated to become a successful tenor too, sometimes performing in his own operas written. But in 1705, at the age of 24, he abandoned this career, thereafter choosing less exposed musical activities and a secure living as secretary to the English Ambassador (he was also to take an English wife). This change of tack was probably the result of severe deafness, to which he succumbed at an early age.

This did not prevent his becoming one of the leading organists of his day, and he left a considerable body of music: solo and chamber works, operas, and church music. His books (written in an informal and entertaining style, and still widely read in Germany today) helped build his reputation as one of Hamburg's, if not Germany's leading musical personalities. Although his compositions are now being actively re-discovered, much of his output was lost forever during the bombing of his native city during World War II.

The Twelve Suites

As was normal for the time, Mattheson published only a few musical works, one of which was the Twelve Suites (subtitled in Germany, *Harmonisches Denckmahl - Harmony's Monument*) which appeared simultaneously in Hamburg and London in 1714. He retired with a copy to the nearest harpsichord, and played them right through at a single sitting - which would have required at least two and a half hours.

The suites offer a huge variety of mood and style, but Mattheson displays a distinct musical personality. Unsurprisingly he also demonstrates familiarity with the music of contemporaries and forebears: Froberger, Kühnau, and Böhm. In the latter case he lifts movements within his Suite XII directly from Böhm's music, presenting them in a modified form and as the basis for his own variations. This raises the same question of tribute versus plagiarism, as Handel's music so often prompts. Tunes are the element most likely to be borrowed by another composer, but Mattheson shows himself a natural and individual melodist, even within keyboard music. Particularly attractive melodies are to be found in his *Airs* - movements inserted among the basic dances of the Baroque Suite. But Mattheson is a rare composer in his natural ability to infuse sarabandes, minuets - in fact all the basic dances, with attractive melodies. The suites are further

enlivened by the presence of a number of rather good musical jokes - a very unusual feature. The most extended is an entire "bad" fugue, placed before the start of Suite XI. Unlike the very good fugues published by Mattheson in his collection *"Die Wohlklingende Fingersprache"* (*"Les Doigts Parlands"*, or "The Talking Fingers"), this one incorporates numerous clichés, false key-relations, and blatant examples of bad, juvenile composition. It almost completely runs out of ideas by line five, just managing to return to the original subject by the end.

The 1714 published version of the suites presents relatively few problems as far as the actual reading of the notes is concerned. But it sometimes seems a little chaotic, and for rigorous and careful presentation cannot compare with, for example, Bach's *Clavierübung*. Unlike Bach, Mattheson was reluctant to be prescriptive, and even used one favourite sarabande twice (in the two D Minor suites, nos.2 and 8)! But in the context of the work of his contemporaries, the suites are modern, original, and advanced both in technique and musical content. In their combination of variety of mood and attractive tunefulness, they exceed most offered by others before him. It is almost certain that Bach would have had a copy, and this raises intriguing possibilities. Did the arrangement of styles influence Bach in his compilation of the Partitas? Did the late use of duple notation in the Gigue of Suite III inspire Bach to an even later exploitation of this technique in the two culminating pieces of Partita VI?[2]

Mattheson Neglected

If we don't hear concert performances of these suites very often, the most probable reason is the low profile that Mattheson enjoys today. In fact, increasing numbers of players are enjoying them in private, since the facsimile of the 1714 edition is quite cheap, and generally legible.

However, there are quite a lot of errors, and some instances of cramped or confusing engraving. The composer himself offered a list of corrections to the edition, but this does not appear in some current issues of the facsimile. It can be found at http://www.daimi.au.dk/~reccmo/scores/mattheson/Allemande-J.Mattheson.pdf[3]

The occasional use of historical clefs may also deter many amateurs. Nevertheless, these problems can be overcome with patience and common sense, and for the virtues already listed, players of harpsichord or clavichord are urged to explore the suites, for which this article can offer no more than a general introduction.

However, one important area of interpretation warrants some exploration, and will occupy the remainder of this article. Mattheson has left us clues which may contribute to a greater understanding of appropriate performance techniques, not just for his, but for other associated music.

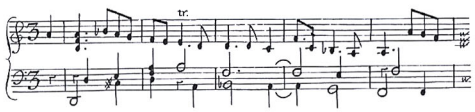
The performance of rhythm

The question of the intended rhythmic performance of (in particular) certain dances within Baroque suites is far from resolved. Indeed, some confident and previously-accepted conclusions reached by authorities like Robert Donington and Howard Ferguson, have in recent years been undermined by a revival of literalism among some performers and scholars.

A literal or reverential approach to the notation will view inconsistencies in the presentation of rhythmic detail, as intentional. The writer, however, is among those who continue to feel that in many contexts a non-literal performance is not only acceptable but sometimes obligatory; that we should try to enter the mindset of an 18th-century composer rather than read his score with a 21st-century scrupulousness. Mattheson's suites, in general, offer an example of the non-proscriptive nature of much Baroque composition. But they also offer specific clues to an approach to performance which may need to transcend the restrictions of notation.

If one's reaction to a literal performance of rhythmic detail is one of discomfort prompted by odd inconsistencies, one may well look out for clues within the score, which might help establish whether a non-literal performance was expected. Mattheson's suites are an unusually rich source of such clues. One which is used occasionally, and to which we shall return later, is "mixed notation". More unusual and important, is a second kind of clue. In dance pieces, in particular, he uses notational "hints", to indicate the expected rhythmic base for the rhythm of a whole piece.

Mattheson's method is slightly different, and is akin to one of three used by Froberger. Like Handel's it is conventional rather than notationally accurate, but there can be little doubt of its meaning: the three introductory notes are to be (if one accepts the message as an obligation) played "short, long, short":



Ex. 1. Mattheson, Suite I, Courante, start of second half[4]

A European practice

Let us set rhythmic hints to one side for a little, and briefly examine the use of simplistic notation of rhythm, in general. The use of a widely understood convention in the area of rhythm had two advantages for a composer. A less detailed and specific notation reduced labour, since writing a piece in equal notes was easier and faster. It also allowed flexibility of interpretation. The degree and consistency of inequality of rhythm could, perhaps should, be left to the performer - like the addition of ornaments. Undoubtedly some players would execute both, better than others.

Playing music in a rhythm different from that given by the notation was a long-standing and widespread tradition in European keyboard music, documented for two centuries. There is evidence that during the Baroque, rhythmic inequality was often left to the player in Italy and England, as well as in Germany, and as a general stylistic nicety it is akin to the more refined and highly-developed convention of *notes inégales* in France. For example, a lilt (within slow movements like allemandes and sarabandes) and a swung rhythm (in faster pieces like courantes) were to be applied by the player even if not explicitly indicated on the page. Where the convention was incomplete (as indeed it was when used by some French composers too, as late as Mattheson's contemporary Louis Marchand), dotted pairs of notes or groups of notes of unequal value appear in the score as inconsistent rhythmic elements, within a context written largely in notes of equal value. It is this practice for which the term "mixed notation" is used. In some instances, a deliberate, or sometimes perhaps an instinctive use of such motifs, as rhythmic hints, provided a clarification of the composer's intention, but it would seem that the provision of such hints was the exception rather than the rule. For some (Bach being perhaps the most obvious example) a respect for the language of notation debarred such inconsistent writing - whatever their expectations regarding performance may have been.

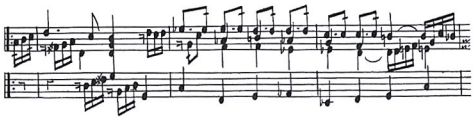
A well-known passage from *On Playing the Flute* by Joachim Quantz, published in 1752, is worth quoting here; since Quantz's book as a whole deals with generalised musicmaking, it does not in this instance emphasise any French style, and at times focuses specifically on the harpsichord:

> Here I must make an essential observation concerning the length of time to which each note must be held. You must know how to distinguish, in performance, between the *principal notes* (normally called the *accented* - or in Italian terminology, *good* notes), and *passing notes*, which some foreigners call *bad* notes. Where possible, the principal notes should always be stressed more than the passing notes. As a result of this rule, the quickest notes in every piece of moderate tempo, or even in an adagio, although they seem to have the same value (on the page), must be played a little unequally, so that the stressed notes of each group, that is the first, third, fifth, and seventh for example, are held slightly longer than the passing notes - namely the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth, although this lengthening must not be as much as if the notes were dotted.[5]

Quantz, an influential contemporary of Bach, Handel, and Mattheson, appears to feel that an element of unequal rhythm was simply a facet of good playing, to be applied as a prerequisite of stylish music making. Most of today's players, however, remain cautious about adopting any quasi-habitual form of execution, and prefer to select passages or pieces which they feel confident to treat in this way.

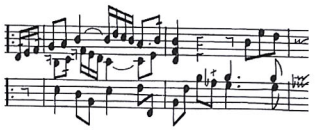
Introductory rhythmic hints

However, where a composer did use introductory hints, the problem of selection is arguably removed. It makes no musical sense in the following passage to accept the message of the introductory motif, and then not to continue in the same style.

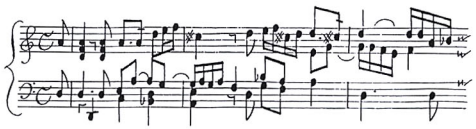


Ex. 2. Mattheson, Suite IX, Allemande, start of second half

On the other hand, where two pieces appear to be in a similar vein, but only one employs such hints, we must make a choice. Did the composer simply not opt for such an introduction in one case, because he expected that an idiomatically unequal rhythm would be applied anyway? Or, on the contrary, did he intentionally write excluding such introductory hints, because in this instance he wanted a rhythmically more literal performance? The next two examples illustrate this problem:



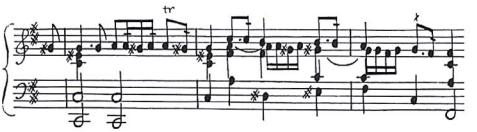
Ex. 3. Mattheson, Suite V, Allemande, start of second half



Ex. 4. Mattheson, Suite I, Allemande, start

The question may be given some clarification by Mattheson, via those pieces which begin with a single upbeat note, but where the second half of the piece starts with an explicitly unequal introductory group - as in the courantes of Suites I and III. Even if he was content to let the player wait until the second half for an explicit rhythmic indication, he must have expected this sort of rhythm to be applied from the beginning, with the rhythmic hint providing no more than a confirmation. Apart from an improbable piece in two conflicting rhythms, the only other explanation is that Mattheson expected a player to glance through the piece in its entirety before starting to play.

Here is another example of a sudden intrusion of explicitly notated unequal rhythm occurring during the course of a piece.

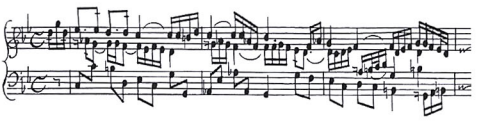


Ex. 5. Mattheson, Suite III, Allemande, start of second half

In this case, the explicit notation does not occur until the first complete bar of the second half is already under way. As before, it is theoretically possible to isolate the motif and play the surrounding material "straight", but what about the parallel motif in the following bar? A more convincing explanation is that the unequal rhythm was what the composer was hearing all or most of the time in his head as he wrote the music down, and from time to time he simply lapsed into a more prescriptive notation. On this assumption it is easy to make a leap of faith, and conclude that the composer would have approved of an unequal performance style for some pieces where he left no explicit rhythmic hints at all.

A crude rhythmic swing?

Mattheson's hints, even when applied to allemandes, may seem to call for something close to a triplet rhythm, although it is often possible to be more discrete. As for how pervasive the rhythm should be, the actual consistency of rhythm which may have been in the composer's mind is suggested by the following introductory hint, where the more usual motif of three stepwise notes is replaced by a very different group:



Ex. 6. Mattheson, Suite V, Allemande Double, beginning

It is still common for the playing of non-French music in an unequal rhythm - where this is accepted at all - to be fenced in by caveats. These will be derived from *a)* a determination to make the music sound subtle; and *b)* a tendency to follow recommendations of some French contemporary theorists for a refined approach to *notes inégales* - one emphasising its suitability for use in stepwise motion, while discouraging inequality in chordal or harmonic passagework.

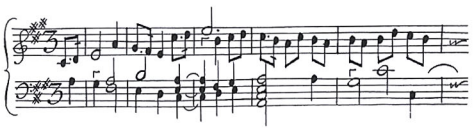
Mattheson here explicitly notates a swung rhythm within such a motif. This may of course be simply because all three-note entries are marked in this way.[6]

But we do, in any case, have a swung rhythm within a motif where many would think it less natural than in the surrounding conjunct material. There are parallels to Ex. 6 within Handel's suites and those of contemporaries in England. The effect of these swung elements within disjunct or chordal material in non-vigorous music is unsubtle, which may suggest an expectation of a less rhythmically refined performance of the whole piece than our modern "good taste" might prefer. And a high level of rhythmic consistency would appear to be regarded as important.

Mixed notation

Another indication of an intended swung rhythm can be found in pieces written in a mixed notation. The most easily identifiable form of this is a mixture of equal and dotted pairs - occurring where it does not seem to offer any musically meaningful variety. Again, examples can easily be found in music by, for example, Purcell and Croft in England, and Pasquini in Italy.

Where the melodic line consists mostly of pairs, as in a courante, an explicit indication of unequal rhythm within a pair can only be grammatically indicated by writing a dotted pair, and we find Mattheson sometimes doing this:



Ex. 7. Mattheson, Suite II, Courante. Bars 1 – 6.

Could the lapse into equal pairs in bar 4 be an indication of true rhythmic variety? The sudden reduction of rhythmic vitality makes this unlikely, a conclusion supported by the second half, where explicit dotted pairs are used almost entirely consistently. Without reference to the second half, one could regard the start of the piece as an example of a rhythmic hint carried to extremes.

The presence or non-presence of mixed notation will depend to some extent on the detailed content of the piece. But we can return to the argument presented earlier, in favour of the application of a swung rhythm even where no explicit indications at all occur, to suggest that in pieces of a similar character to Ex. 7 but where the music is written almost or entirely without dotted pairs, a swung rhythm may nevertheless have been expected. Several of Mattheson's courantes lie in this category.

The eclectic nature of Mattheson's suites dictates that only some of the pieces contained therein offer the sort of clues so far described. In addition, it may be instructive that the incidence of rhythmic hints decreases as the suites proceed. Here is a list. The examples of mixed notation give only the most blatant instances:

Allemandes: introductory hints -
Suite III, second half, plus mixed notation
Suite V, both halves; double, both halves
Suite IX, second half

Courantes: introductory hints: -
Suite I, second half; double, both halves
Suite II, first half, plus mixed notation
Suite III, second half

Conclusions

The most basic message here is that no musical sense is made by a literal performance of a piece where clear rhythmic hints occur. In these cases at least, the player must infer the rhythmic base for the whole piece from the introduction.

Once the actual notational hints have been taken on board, and those pieces which are clearly in a different idiom (like mis-titled Italianate correntes) have been set on one side, there remain some pieces of a similar character to those which carry hints, which a player may be justified in treating as if they did. The occurrence of odd rhythmically explicit motifs during pieces rather than at their outset, suggests that for Mattheson a conventional rhythmic base, at least in certain types of piece, was not an occasional excursion but a frequent assumption. Instances of similar hints and mixed notation within the work of Mattheson's contemporaries suggests that this conventional approach to rhythm was widespread.

Beyond the scope of this short article is the question of any more extended use of rhythmic inequality. Quantz's prescription suggests a wider, more habitual performance practice. The comment of such a sophisticated musician,

that inequality is an element of "good" playing, might be seen as being at odds with the rather bold rhythm explicitly suggested by Mattheson for some of his dance-pieces. However, French authorities wrote of various degrees of *notes inégales*, from the very subtle to the bold and vigorous, and Quantz was himself a master of the French style. Mattheson's suites are entitled *Pièces de Clavecin*, and all the pieces therein have fashionable French titles. So it would be appropriate to end by recommending a similar variety of treatment for *Harmony's Monument*.

A straightforward, quite literal approach may indeed be suitable for some pieces. For others, as we have seen, a bold, heavy, unequal rhythm may have been expected. But between these extremes, and beyond the capacity of notation, a good 18th-century performer would probably have been expected to apply a light, elegant inequality to much of the music.

Some notes by the author:

The facsimile of the first edition of Mattheson's Suites is published by Performers' Facsimiles (New York). No. 86021.

Also, Edition Walhall (EW 652) has released two volumes, one for each set of 6 suites - the first modern edition. It has insufficient editorial commentary, and the player will be faced with the same problems of questionable notes or rhythm as appear in the facsimile. There are also a few newly introduced errors. But it is clear and easy to read, and eliminates the use of historical clefs.

(Endnotes)

1 This portrait of Mattheson may be found at http://portrait.kaar.at/Musikgeschichte%2018.Jhd%20Teil%203/image11.html

2 It has also been argued that a challenge offered to Bach by Mattheson in print may have encouraged the younger man to write *The Art of Fugue. See Gregory G. Butler, "Der vollkommene Capellmeister as a stimulus to J.S. Bach's late fugal writing,"* New Mattheson Studies, *(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1983, 2006), 295.*

3 At Werner Icking Music Archive JK225.06.07 http://icking-music-archive.org

4 All examples given in this article are from the facsimile of the 1714 edition.

5 Quantz, *On Playing the Flute, Chapter 11, paragraph 12. [Translations supplied by author].*

6 One is incorrectly so engraved. The setter has given the introduction to the courante of Suite VI in this way, but the piece is an Italianate *corrente, and he should have given three semiquavers (sixteenths).*