

REVIEW

The Sonatas of Henry Purcell: Rhetoric and Reversal, by Alon Schab (University of Rochester Press, 2018).

Schab's marvelous new monograph is a study of Henry Purcell's twenty-two trio sonatas, Z.790–Z.801 (published 1683) and Z.802–Z.811 (published, posthumously, 1697), with emphasis on contrapuntal form ("the structural models with which Purcell deploys that process over time," p. 14), as opposed to contrapuntal content, the focus of an earlier study of these sonatas (Howard 2007).

As the author admits (p. 3), "the recognition of Purcell's sonatas as masterworks of chamber music is reserved mainly for Purcell enthusiasts." Following Schab's encouragement of "readers outside the Purcellian circle ... to study Purcell" (*ibid.*), I write this review as a theorist of common-practice tonal music.

After reviewing the book, I will present two contrasting perspectives on how reading the book may be rewarding specifically for readers with different specializations.

General Survey

The title promises a study of "rhetoric and reversal" in the sonatas of Henri Purcell. Schab focuses on analogies between sections of a musical piece and those of a speech, with special emphasis on the correlation between mirror symmetry (especially in the form of chiasmus, i.e. the reverse order of elements that preserve their original form), and the rhetorical device of *commutatio* (p. 160). Beyond that, most analyses in the book do not depend heavily on details of rhetorical devices. For example, manipulations of harmony and hypermeter studied in the chapter "Harmony and Counterpoint in the Service of Rhetoric," may be studied also without invoking *peroratio* (p. 49) and other concepts from rhetoric. The independence of the analyses from rhetorical devices is eventually advantageous, perhaps contrary to the author's intentions: the analytical observations throughout the book are highly illuminating even for readers who are skeptical concerning the very mapping of rhetoric onto music.¹ Schab evidently has an intimate knowledge of the repertoire, including other works by Purcell and his contemporaries, and he provides analyses that are often not merely convincing but also stimulating. The book compensates for the focus on interesting examples with quantitative research that states the norms, e.g. the proportions between the strains of all binary movements in Purcell's keyboard suites and theatrical airs (Tables 4.1, p. 115 and 4.2, p. 116).

The term "reversal" seems to serve two meanings. In the combination "symmetry and reversal" (pp. 7, 45) with reference to retrograde and palindrome, it simply means mirror symmetry. The other sense is "reversal of expectations," roughly analogous to "denial of implications" (Narmour 1990, 151–52): "how [Purcell] manipulated musical expectation—how he established large-scale unities ... and how he worked *against them*" (p. 16; my emphasis).

¹ For comparison of mapping of rhetoric onto musical form vs. competing conceptualizations, see Zbikowski 2002, 292–99.

Along the general thread of rhetoric and reversal, Schab introduces rich insights into the sonatas. The introduction and first chapter offer a meticulous historical background on sources, temperament, transmission, influence and chronology, claiming that, in this book, “historical arguments ... inform analyses,” while “analytical insight is used to reconstruct chronology” (p. 15). The combination is most convincing in the sections on mean-tone temperament at the end of chapter 2, and on solmization in chapter 3. This chapter, “Indiscernible Structures,” stresses the meta-theoretical point that those features of the music that are barely perceptible in real-time listening might still be part of the compositional process (based on internal, analytical, evidence). Sometimes, Purcell simply “cheated” by writing or excluding shorthand signs, so that the notated version is more symmetrical than what one hears (p. 115).

Chapter 4 discusses what the author calls “proportional symmetry,” while chapters 5 and 6 discuss mirror symmetry.² Schab finds many examples of chiasmus in the order of movements, and especially in the organization of entries (rotations versus counter-rotations, as in Table 5.3, p. 154).

Chiastic organization is most intricate in movements that involve different materials, i.e. inversion, augmentation, or two or three fugal subjects. The chiasmus need not involve temporal symmetry, as sometimes it is only the order of entries that is arranged in reverse order (as in Table 6.1, p. 173). When the mirror symmetry is inexact, Schab often assumes (mostly convincingly; e.g. p. 174) a more rigid symmetry in the planning stage.³

The final chapter discusses ground bass, on which Purcell based a single sonata (Z. 807) but also many other pieces including Dido’s lament.

Benefits for Scholars of Later Music

Acquaintance with Issues in Purcell

Reading such an expert book on Purcell immediately introduces outsiders (and students) to a very wide spectrum of issues in Purcell studies, which goes far beyond the specific subject under discussion. Here are some of the most substantial issues of which I had insufficient advance knowledge:

- Purcell’s notational practice included a different use of accidentals (no natural signature) and of time signatures (dots across barlines; In Example 1.8, p. 42, the same time signature stands for 3/2 and 3/8).
- Purcell amalgamates “Italianate” features (pp. 23, 26, 87, 123, 222) with the English consort tradition (pp. 4, 6, 43).
- Within Purcell’s output, there are phases that count as conservative and innovative (p. 22 on their combination in the 1697 set).

² The mathematical ordinary terms for these symmetry types are translational symmetry vs. reflection symmetry. Morgan (1998) presents them in relation to music.

³ More brilliant hypotheses without external evidence include possible reasons why the sonatas Z. 802 and Z. 803 were discarded from the 1683 set (p. 25); also: “*it is also possible* that Purcell aimed at some point to publish a companion to Z. 790 in the form of homage to “Baptist of France” (p. 229, my emphasis).

- Purcell's use of mean-tone temperament (pp. 77–89) might explain specific details in some works.
- Purcell used the solmization system (pp. 104–109), with significance for hexachordal upside-down inversion (around the middle of a hexachord such as ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la).

As a novice Purcellian, I am still unable to independently grasp Purcell's substyles or to notice mean-tone temperament in recordings, but the book quite efficiently makes clear what professional Purcell scholarship requires.

Insights on Later Music

One somewhat surprising advantage of reading the book is the wealth of insights that may enrich the understanding of music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sometimes the insights come from explicit comments within the text, other times from the examples the book brings.

For example, "formulae" such as the "Italian gambit" (Example 1.2, p. 32) seem to be related to schemata in the sense that Gjerdingen (2007) finds in the eighteenth-century galant style. It remains to be seen whether formulae and schemata are really the same concept, and how the specific formulae Purcell uses intersect with Gjerdingen's specific schemata.

A connection with a more remote repertory comes from the tonal scheme that arranges the first set of sonatas based on "rising and falling thirds" (pp. 22–23).

The ascending keys are alternately major and minor (g–B≅–d–F–a–C–e–G), creating a series of what is known in neo-Riemannian theory as R(elative) and L(eading-tone flip) relations. Each key is the diatonic mediant of its predecessor: the third and fifth of one triad become the root and third of the next triad (Kopp [2002, 10] calls them all "upper relative mediants"). In descent, the series c–A–f–D still alternates major and minor tonics, but now the chromatic relations avoid shared notes altogether ("lower disjunct mediants" [Kopp 2002, 11]).

The discussion of "manipulating the hypermeter" (pp. 65–77) is especially intriguing for those acquainted with its counterpart in Rothstein (1989, 40–63, also up to 101), who studied phrase overlap, metrical re-interpretation, elongated upbeats, and phrase expansion and compression in Haydn, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Wagner. Schab uses the terms "arsis" and "thesis" apparently for unaccented and accented units respectively (pp. 77, 119), and seems to hold the view that odd units are less accented than even ones. This is not the common view today, but it has its own tradition. Rothstein (2008) studies the different traditions in the eighteenth century. Observing Purcell in this respect is all the more appropriate.

Some specific devices Schab shows map neatly onto techniques familiar from later music (in Example 4.2 [p. 117], Z.796, end of largo, the "ambiguous" measure 95 that "relates simultaneously" to mm. 91 and 99 is a case of phrase overlap). Other insights, such as the "confusing conflation of meters that can hardly be perceived correctly just by ear" in Example 2.13, p. 75, suggests a weak degree of directionality that presumably is not to be found in more paradigmatic common-practice tonal music.

The book shows many examples of imitations in half-measure shifts (e.g. the Canzona of Z.800, Example 6.10 [pp. 193–94] and table 6.10 [p. 196]), a familiar feature also in the late

Baroque.⁴ Half-measure shifts are also possible in non-imitative passages, as in the setting of heptametric poetic lines as seven beats without completion into full measures (Example 2.9, p. 68). This is striking for anyone familiar with the prosody of nineteenth-century German Lied, where this never happens.

Finally, issues of tonal structure are of essential concern. Schab's analyses stress cadential key points, either explicitly (Tables 4.4 and 4.5, p. 135)⁵ or tacitly (Examples 4.3 and 4.4, p. 121), downplaying the beginning of phrases. In this respect, a difference in analytical tools may lead to a difference in observation. My Figure 1 brings such a case in point. Schab in his Example 4.4, p. 121 presents four chords that end each 4-measure subphrase, but chooses to eliminate the new beginning at m. 9. For me, this is a modulatory parallel period of a special kind: the consequent begins on V but arrives at a structural tonic early on; the melody in the consequent is in the bass.⁶

Figure 1. Z. 801, *Poco Largo*, opening

a. Schab, Example 4.4, tonal structure (excerpt)

Harmonic key points

bars 48-59

Hypermeter: A T A T

b. Annotated score

antecedent melody in 1st violin

mf

I V (weakened half-cadence)

modulatory consequent: melody in the bass

V I VI: perfect authentic cadence

⁴ Since tables such as 6.10 place entries on the second half of the measure under the same rubric with entries on the first beat “for the ease of reading” (pp. 189 and 202), they lose sight of imitations in incomplete amounts of measures.

⁵ Some measure numbers in Table 4.4 do not match the music.

⁶ For parallel periods where the melody in the consequent is stated in the bass, see Mozart, Piano Sonata K. 309, third movement, mm. 87–96 and the theme of Grieg, *Illusion*, Lyric Piece Op. 57, No. 3.

For my part, the application of parallel periods to Purcell raises the question of biased anachronism. I would argue that paradigmatic parallel periods existed in England as far back as *Greensleeves*. Beyond that, while my own interest admittedly is hardly ever historical, the author aims at a blend of “historical issues alongside a-historical ones” (p. 9).

* * *

Schab’s book is a wonderful contribution to the close analytical study of seventeenth-century music. I share the author’s hope for a wider absorption of Purcell’s music into theoretical discourse, both for its contribution to the recognition of Purcell in general (the author’s aim), and for cross-stylistic insights. These need not be mere generalizations of “what Purcell has in common with Rimsky-Korsakov.”⁷ Rather, such insights may illuminate specific phenomena that apply to particular passages by Purcell and by composers in other styles.

Collaborations of theorists and historians, whose skills and perspectives complement each other, seem to be a promising route toward deepening the study of Purcell.

Bibliography

- Gjerdingen, Robert O. 2007. *Music in the Galant Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Howard, Alan D. 2007. *Purcell and the Poetics of Artifice: Compositional Strategies in the Fantasias and Sonatas*. PhD Dissertation, King’s College.
- Kopp, David. 2002. *Chromatic Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, Robert P. 1998. “Symmetrical Form and Common-Practice Tonality.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 20/1: 1–47.
- Narmour, Eugene. 1990. *The Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures: The Implication-Realization Model*. Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rothstein, William N. 1989. *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music*. New York: Schirmer.
- . 2008. “National Metrical Types in Music of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries.” In *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music*, ed. Danuta Mirka & Kofi Agawu, 112–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zbikowski, Lawrence M. 2002. *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

YOSEF GOLDENBERG

The Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance

⁷ This is a paraphrase of Gjerdingen’s (2007, 140) criticism of “a chord-centered view of musical articulation” as an approach that “highlights only what Locatelli has in common with Rimsky-Korsakov.”