

Passus Duriusculus

from

Dietrich Bartel's

Musica Poetica: musical-rhetorical figures in German

Baroque

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Translation from the original:

Handbuch der musikalischen Figurenlehre

Definition of the term (pp. 357-358):

Passus Duriusculus: a chromatically altered ascending or descending melodic line.

The *passus duriusculus* is only encountered in Bernhard's *Tractatus*, as are the related *saltus duriusculus* and *cadentia duriuscula*. Like these other two figures, *passus duriusculus* is not a rhetorical term, but rather a vivid description of the musical device: it is a "hard" or "harsh" (*duriusculus*) "step" or "passage" (*passus*), musically realized through various uses of the semitone. The familiar device of a chromatic or chromatically altered ascending or descending voice is not only frequently encountered in Baroque compositions but is also specifically mentioned in Walther's definition of *catabasis* as a *subjectum catabatum*. In addition, a number of musical-rhetorical figures expressly refer to chromatic alteration, including *parrhesia* and *pathopoeia*. The *passus duriusculus* indeed could just as well be explained as a form of *pathopoeia*.

The expressive content of a chromatically descending fourth, a familiar and widely used specific form of the *passus duriusculus* (*subjectum catabatum*), has been explored by a great many composers.¹

¹ Peter Williams provides ample examples of the use of the descending chromatic fourth throughout music history in his articles, "Figurenlehre from Monteverdi to Wagner," *Musical Times* 120 (1979): 476-79, 571-73, and "Encounters with the Chromatic Fourth," *Musical Times* 126 (1985): 276-78, 339-43. However, to link the *Figurenlehre* of *musica poetica* with the music of Beethoven, Verdi, and Wagner is simply a gross misunderstanding of the concept. That is not to say that the use or expression of such a musical device throughout music history is unrelated. A clear distinction must be made however, between the Baroque concept of musical-rhetorical figures or *Figurenlehre* and the musical devices which these figures describe or embody.

Eggebrecht points to the use of this form of the *passus duriusculus* as a musical expression with a specific significance or semantic content.² As Heinrich Schütz's pupil and assistant in Dresden, Bernhard was deeply influenced by the music of his teacher and mentor. Although Bernhard's *Figurenlehre* focuses on the appropriate use of dissonance, it is always to be understood in the context of the Lutheran *musica poetica* tradition, which strives to express the text and arouse the appropriate affections, thereby teaching and edifying the listener. This is the intended goal of the music of Schütz and the purpose behind the writings of Bernhard. In establishing the *passus duriusculus*'s adoption of a specific pathos-laden significance, Eggebrecht reveals how a figure can be used as an exegetical tool. Not only can it reflect musically a particular text but it can represent the adopted significance in combination with other texts or in textless contexts. In the same manner that the spoken sermon is to teach and edify the listener, so too is *musica poetica* to preach rather than simply entertain. Should a musical-rhetorical figure be sufficiently specific to take on a definite extramusical significance, it can become both an expressive device and an exegetical and interpretive tool. Eggebrecht therefore differentiates between the more general *pathopoeia*, which aims at *movere*, and the *passus duriusculus*, whose goal is also "a certain teaching admonishing, and pointing out of the meaning."³

prepared by Thomas Braatz

² Eggebrecht, Hans Heinrich. "Zum Figur-Begriff der Musica poetica," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 16 (1959): 57-69.

³ *Ibid.*, 66.