

‘Now swift, now hesitating:

The Stylus Phantasticus and the art of fantasy’

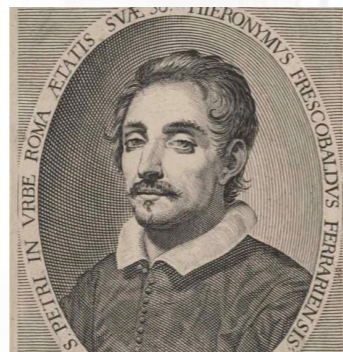
Terence Charlston

The term *stylus phantasticus* was used by writers on music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a category to describe works which could not be explained within the norms of more clearly defined structures. As an explanation of these artistic phenomena, its early use was concerned with the ‘fantasy’ or imagination of the composer and his composition while later theorists expanded the term to articulate the freedom of creativity and improvisation which they considered to exemplify good performance.

The ‘fantastic’ or ‘fantasy’ style is an important and widely recognised feature of certain types of Baroque music, especially from the seventeenth century. Such pieces, largely instrumental, may be abstract in character (sonatas, preludes, fantasias, toccatas, ricercars, etc.) while some have external programmes or a special descriptive function (for example, battle pieces, imitations of natural sounds and events, and depictions of human

behaviour or emotional states). They range from keyboard music by Frescobaldi, Froberger, Buxtehude and Bach to string music by Schmelzer and Biber. While this musical trend lies on a north/south geographical axis between Italy, where it is said to have originated, and the Netherlands, its influence was felt in other countries such as England and France. Beyond the Baroque age, its presence is discernible in Classical and Romantic works, such as the fantasias of 19th- and 20th-century composers.

In recent times practitioners of historically informed performance have adopted the expression *stylus phantasticus* to refer to the more bizarre, unpredictable and extreme effects which might be said to mark out “period instrument” performance from mainstream (and by implication) less historically aware, modern instrument interpretation. Extempore fantasy lies at the heart of this present meaning. The accomplished interpreter,



Girolamo Frescobaldi
1583 - 1643



Athanasius Kircher (1601 or
1602–1680)



Dietrich Buxtehude
1637 - 1707



Johann Sebastian Bach
1685 - 1750



Johann Heinrich Schmelzer
c. 1620 - 1680



Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber
1644 - 1704

Ton Koopman, sums this up rather neatly:

Stylus phantasticus wants to keep the listener awake by special effects, astonishment, irregular voice leadings, dissonances, variations in rhythm and imitation. It is a free, improvisational style which forces the audience to listen full of astonishment while wondering ‘how is this possible?’ (Koopman 1991, 150)

Just as the term is difficult to define and consequently loosely applied today, so its meaning in the seventeenth century was also fluid. The Baroque polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) most famously defined the *stylus phantasticus* in his *Musurgia Universalis* (1650), Book VII, 585: [Fig 1.]

The stylus phantasticus is appropriate for instruments. It is the most free and unfettered method of composition, bound to nothing, neither to words, nor to a harmonious subject.

It is organised with regard to manifest invention, the hidden reason of harmony, and an ingenious, skilled connection of harmonic phrases and fugues. And it is divided into those pieces which are commonly called Phantasias, Ricercatas, Toccatas, and Sonatas. (Translation from Brewer 2010, 25)

Kircher’s *stylus phantasticus* was the third of eight styles of music catalogued according to type of expression and use. The others were:

- *Ecclesiasticus* (sacred),
- *Canonicus* (to show the skill of the composer),
- *Madrigalescus*,
- *Melsimaticus* (aria),
- *Hyposchematicus* (dance),
- *Symphoniacus* (instrumental ensemble) and
- *Dramaticus* or *Recitativus*.

Kircher also gave musical examples of each style. These included Lassus and Palestrina for the ecclesiastic style and