



## Commentary on Channan Willner, “More on Handel and the Hemiola”

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ABSTRACT: Channan Willner’s article discusses hemiola from the vantage point of an omniscient analyst armed with a score. This commentary asks several questions about such an approach when applied to relatively unfamiliar music, raising the possibility of incorporating consideration of the listener’s (or analyst’s) state of knowledge (including knowledge of related works and of historical performance practice) into the analysis.

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[1] In reading Channan Willner’s essay about hemiola in several works of Handel (“[More on Handel and the Hemiola: Overlapping Hemiolas](#),” *Music Theory Online* 2.3 (1996)), I have found myself uneasy about what might be called, pre-theoretically, its avoiding questions about the work’s historical context and its relationships to other works of a similar type. I have been interested recently in how a listener’s knowledge, including historical knowledge and knowledge of performances, impinges on listening. Among students of early music it has become customary to speak of certain performances as “historically informed,” implying attention to historical practices and cultural context; I would like to suggest that an analogous concept might be applied to listening, although my concerns here go beyond those of applying historical information to analysis (and I certainly do not wish to argue for historical “authenticity” in listening, whatever that might be.)

[2] In order to find a theoretical formulation for my unease, I have found it helpful to enumerate several unstated assumptions that seem to underlie the article. As similar assumptions are often made in analysis, perhaps it would be better to consider these to be conventions that are normally adopted in this particular style of analysis, becoming problematical only when not recognized as such. (I apologize if, in enumerating these conventions, I sound like a musicologist taking theorists to task along currently fashionable lines of argument; I am not unsympathetic to the general mode of discourse under discussion here, having written some such myself, and wish only to make explicit what tends to go unacknowledged in this type of analysis.)

[3] First, the music is being written about as if it has no context: we are told the piece is a sarabande, yet not what this genre designation means to the way in which the music is heard or played. This is a specific instance of the application of a second

assumption, namely that in hearing such a work we hear empirically, without intertextual reference even to other works that we understand as belonging to the same category (in this case, to the same genre of Baroque dance). This, in turn, is related to a third assumption, that the analysis is describing a fixed or ideal (real) object rather than providing an account of how one listener (presumably the analyst) hears or contemplates that object. There has, of course, been much discussion in recent years about such assumptions; I believe they become particularly problematical in dealing with music that is relatively unfamiliar and in which aspects of performance practice may have a significant effect on how it is perceived.

[4] Let me begin with the notion of category, since I would argue that most acts of listening include categorization of the music being heard, and that such categorization plays an important role in listening strategies. I would like to suggest that the process by which one chooses to favor or lend credence to particular implications of the musical surface must be shaped, to a large degree, by intertextual reference. In particular, the strategies of a listener with a special interest in historical performance are likely to be shaped by familiarity with a large repertory of other sarabandes (or, more precisely, with many such works performed according to current precepts of historical performance practice).

[5] What I have in mind is something like this. A performance of the first piece in question—the sarabande from Handel’s G-minor suite HWV 432, the seventh of the “Eight Great Suites” published in 1720—passes through measures 6–7, where Willner finds the first of the piece’s fully realized hemiolas. Here, as Willner’s example 2 shows, a hemiola seems to be articulated by “durational accent” and other means. Yet, I would suggest that a listener familiar with other sarabandes, particularly ones by Handel, is likely to recognize that the formation in this passage, although containing a hemiolic element, is not so clearly hemiolic as Willner seems to assume. In other words, intertextual reference may lead to the listener’s discounting the possibility that the passage’s primary metrical form is indeed that of a hemiola.

[6] To be sure, the accentuation of beat 2 of measure 7 (through a  $\frac{4}{4}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$  progression over a sustained V in the bass) would seem to clinch his case. That is to say that the arrival of a whole note (f) in the bass on the second beat of measure 7 causes one to reduce the relative degree of accentuation that one would otherwise attribute to the downbeat of that measure. The suspension in the inner voice is likewise, despite the absence of a tie between the two Bbs, a formation that implies the second as the stronger of the first two beats (even as it sets up a contrary accentual pattern—that of a suspension—that reinstates the downbeat as strong). Thus, by this reasoning one transfers the accentuation normally accruing to the downbeat to its successor, therefore understanding measures 6–7 as a “realized” hemiola, to use Willner’s term.

[7] The problem here is that a sarabande of this type (not all sarabandes do this) *normally* accents the second beat, as is indeed the case throughout this movement. For this reason, however, in a sarabande the (relative) accentuation of the second beat is insufficient to imply a hemiola. To put it more positively, it is possible to have numerous accented second beats without strongly disrupting (to use another term Willner employs) the movement’s basic metrical pattern. In this particular passage, the second beat of measure 7 may indeed be stronger (in some sense) than the downbeat of the measure, but it does not follow that the downbeat is therefore less strong than the preceding beat (in measure 6), as the hemiolic interpretation would require.

[8] I think, moreover, that a listener with special knowledge of historical performance is especially likely to discount implications of hemiola in the particular cadential formula with which we are dealing here, first, because strongly marked hemiola is relatively rare in sarabandes (as opposed to other dances, particularly courantes), and, second, because such a listener is especially likely to be aware of alternate listening strategies. Such a listener may also be predisposed against hearing hemiolas in the third movement of Handel’s concerto grosso op. 6, no. 6, considered later in Willner’s essay; Burney described this movement as “the musette, or rather chaconne, in this concerto,” recognizing in it the characteristic metrical pattern of the French chaconne, in which realized hemiola is extremely rare. I can only assert these points within the present essay; I ask the reader to accept, for the purpose of argument, that current trends in historical performance practice would discourage bringing out the particular hemiolas under discussion.

[9] One alternate listening strategy likely to be encouraged by such a performance is to consider measure 7 a “normal” measure for a late-Baroque sarabande, with accented first and second beats. Measure 6 then becomes an abnormal or disruptive measure, but only in the sense that it lacks any event on the second beat, instead sustaining the chord on the downbeat through two whole beats. (For this reason the editorial trill on the downbeat, which is a means for sustaining the

upper-voice note on a keyboard instrument as well as emphasizing its melodic continuity to the following d”, is well taken; it is at any rate strongly implied by the written-out termination (the two eighths) that follows). A listener attuned to current views on historical performance practice is particularly likely to adopt this strategy (or, rather, to assign it greater weight) because such a listener is likely to have heard numerous performances in which the downbeat is strongly accented in precisely this context. (That is, downbeats corresponding to that of the present measure 7 are played more loudly or otherwise given more accentuation than is the preceding beat, despite the implied hemiola that a player or listener less familiar with current views of historical performance practice might find here.)

[10] To be sure, such a listener will perceive realized hemiolas when given a sufficiently strong set of cues. I would be reluctant to offer a uniform set of conditions defining “sufficiently strong,” but one strong indicator would be the presence of a suspension or syncopation in the leading melodic voice. This occurs only once in the sarabande, in the cadential passage in measures 14–15 (included in Willner’s Example 4). Here the treble incorporates a repeated dotted rhythm (dotted half, eighth; as Willner suggests, this is related to a rhythm heard in measure 13 and earlier). Within late Baroque style this is a particularly powerful way of articulating a duple grouping of quarter-note pulses; it is, moreover, one likely to be exaggerated by current early music performers through “overdotting” (often referred to less precisely as double-dotting; by reducing the short note after the dot to a small fraction of a beat, such a practice increases the relative degree of stress on the following long note).

[11] But one need not have special knowledge of historical performance practice to make such decisions while listening—or, rather, one’s sense of history need not reach back any farther than the 20 seconds or so that it takes to hear the first eight-measure phrase of the piece, which is repeated. The repetition alone is enough to demonstrate to a careful listener that certain potential events, such as the hemiola that Willner sees emerging in measures 5–6, are never realized. Hence, on hearing these measures a second time a listener is less likely to accord as much weight to the hemiolic strategy. It would be interesting to see a type of analysis that takes account of this sort of change in hearing.

[12] For reasons similar to the above, I am uncomfortable with references to “allusions” and “reminiscences” later in the piece to the (implicit) hemiolas in measures 5–7. There is, first, the question of what precisely we mean by “allusion” or “reminiscence” in a composition: repeating something (e.g., a musical structure) is not the same as alluding to it, and only listeners, not pieces, can reminisce. Accepting such language, however, as a way of referring to (inexact) musical repetition, I would still suggest that one is as likely to hear allusions or reminiscences intertextually, that is, in relation to other pieces, as one is to hear them as referring to previous events of a similar nature within the same piece. This is because, first, measures 5–7 present nothing very unusual or remarkable—little that a listener with a broad familiarity of early eighteenth-century sarabandes (including those outside the canonic works of Bach and Handel)—is likely to notice as being distinct from similar formulaic passages in other sarabandes; and, second, because this type of piece, *perhaps* more than many others (especially from post-Baroque repertoires), is very tightly bound to genre conventions. That is, virtually every detail of its rhythm, melody, and harmony is a formula that can be found in other examples of the same genre. Again, a sufficiently “informed” listener will have heard many instances of such formulas, to the point that many such listeners may not even be able to recall, during a performance, whether a “reference” at, say, measure 25, is to a previous point in the same piece or to a similar passage in another one.

[13] One might dismiss such an uncertainty as a product of careless listening. But that would be to adopt a point of view that privileges the analyst armed with score and specialized theoretical knowledge. Such a view will not go very far toward understanding how a piece like this is heard by most listeners. Moreover, such analysis, by constructing a single, hypostasized interpretation of the piece, runs the risk of being written or read as a *prescription* for a particular “structural” hearing of the music rather than as a description of how it is actually listened to. I recognize that attempting to take account of a listener’s intertextual references, state of knowledge, and other such matters alluded to here runs the risk of removing from analysis the objective grounding that the score supplies in a traditional approach such as Willner’s. However, I am not arguing for a wholly subjective approach, nor that analysis be replaced by, say, a narrative of the listener’s experience, or by cognitive studies, though both approaches might well be illuminating here. I wish to point out only that assertions about the existence of “implied” or “realized” hemiola in this music (and, by extension, of implications and realizations elsewhere) represent analytical decisions that depend on the analyst’s particular knowledge of repertory and style. Another way of putting it is that

a more complete analysis of hemiola even in a single short work of Handel might include references to similar formations in related pieces and to the ways in which the analyst has heard them performed (or imagines their being performed).

[14] In closing I would like to offer an alternate interpretation of another element of the piece mentioned in the essay. The repetition of the closing phrase (measures 29–32 = 21–24) could be heard as a *petite reprise*, a convention employed in many late-Baroque binary forms whereby the final phrase is repeated (sometimes only after the entire second “half” has received its complete repetition). In the present piece, the two statements of the recurring cadential phrase (the “petite reprise”) are attached to the ends of two similar but distinct phrases, thus playing with the usual convention. Moreover, the *petite reprise* itself constitutes a sequential development of a version of a motive (the falling fifth) previously heard in measures 1–3 (bracketed in Willner’s Example 2). The latter motive, however, is shifted in measure 21 ff. by half a beat in order to become a type of on-the-beat “sigh” figure occasionally encountered in German music from around 1700 and shortly afterward (as in the opening of Bach’s Cantata 131).

[15] This sort of information does not invalidate Willner’s analysis of the passage, but it points up the subjectivity—that is, the privileging of particular analytical criteria over others—inherent in his assertion of the “comparatively mechanical” and “less inspired” character of the closing phrase. Another listener might be more ready to hear it and its repetition as both inspired and affecting. It is true, as Willner notes, that the sequential regularity of three of these four closing sub-phrases (measures 17–20, 21–24, and 29–32) results in a lower level of “tension,” that is, fewer disruptions of the normative accentual pattern of the late-Baroque sarabande. But, as I have tried to suggest earlier, one could hear the piece from the beginning as containing fewer of these disruptions than Willner perceives. Moreover, by focusing on *metrical* “tension,” Willner’s essay ascribes relatively little weight to the *registral* tension that, for example, could be heard in the repeated returns to high g” (the piece’s highest structural tone) in the closing phrases (especially in measures 22 and 30).

[16] I want to emphasize that I do not attribute any special correctness or “ontological privilege” (as Richard Taruskin has inaccurately characterized my views, in *Text and Act*, New York: Oxford, 1995, page 45) to listening that happens to be informed by knowledge of historical performance practice. My intention has been to suggest how, on the particular question of how one hears hemiolas, one might incorporate the listener into the analysis—that is, how the varying types of knowledge and listening experience that each listener brings to an audition of a piece might be taken account of. In particular, I want to suggest that, by understanding the analysis as uncovering implications of one sort or another in the music, we can discuss both those implications and their realizations not as fixed realities but rather as mental constructs whose weight, that is, the degree to which they are first postulated and then accepted by the listener, will vary from listener to listener—or even within a single listener, as the latter grows more familiar with the piece or with its context (the latter understood as both a set of related pieces and other historical or cultural knowledge, including familiarity with varying performance practices).

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