



Review of Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism.*
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Stones, wood, and lime do not constitute a building, no matter how good they are in and of themselves. They must be joined together and connected in a certain manner if they are to make a house.⁽¹⁾

[1] Fantasias have been part of the western music tradition for centuries, but have proven problematic since their inception. Writers struggle to characterize works within the genre; they are conflicted between describing fantasias as the most wondrous pieces and faulting them for an apparent lack of formal coherence. Though many leading composers—including C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann—wrote fantasias, they have been marginalized in terms of repertory and scholarship. Nevertheless, *Fantasia* elements, which incongruously wormed their way into more formal genres such as the sonata, were among the most essential compositional components, prized by composers and audiences alike.

[2] Many noted scholars have ventured to explain these enigmatic pieces. In the eighteenth century Charles Burney catalogued the prodigious improvisatory ability of C.P.E. Bach on the clavichord and provided an account of what late eighteenth-century improvisation looked and sounded like.⁽²⁾ C.P.E. Bach wrote about the fantasia and *fantasie* procedures in the *Versuch*.⁽³⁾ The eighteenth-century theorists Sulzer and Koch devised ways of dealing with the compositional process involved in creating this music.⁽⁴⁾ In the early part of the 20th century, Schenker analyzed fantasias by C.P.E. Bach.⁽⁵⁾ More recently Charles Rosen, Leonard Ratner, and Joel Lester have provided models for understanding late eighteenth-century music.⁽⁶⁾ Mark Evan Bonds and Elaine Sisman have added to the scholarship, incorporating rhetoric and musical wit.⁽⁷⁾ The central issue raised by these accounts is whether we can derive meaning from the fantasia—a genre that often seems to lack formal procedures. More generally, this gets at the problem of finding meaning in instrumental music.

[3] To better understand fantasias, scholars have employed various metaphors to help delineate structure. A conventional form not only drives perception and expectation, it promotes coherence. Authors like Bonds have claimed that rhetoric served as the model for eighteenth-century musical composition. In my own work on C.P.E. Bach, I claim that for his fantasias this archetype was indeed the rhetorical model. Depending on the listener's familiarity with the rhetorical model, C.P.E. Bach could play with the audience's expectations to heighten their sense of drama. The fantasia and eighteenth-century music in general are poetic: "you do not alter the words of the language, they remain always the same; what counts is the manner in which you put them together!"⁽⁸⁾ C.P.E. Bach's affective musical discourses involved many contrasting

rhetorical materials such as exclamation, interjection, suspension, interruption, affirmation, and negation. Through the dramatic use of these semiotic guides, situating them within the framework of the rhetorical model, as well as associating these ideas with congruent key affects, C.P.E. Bach produced organized, coherent, musical arguments that were imbued with content and effected communication.

[4] Annette Richards proposes a radical new way of modeling the fantasia, grounded in the contemporary aesthetics of *Gartenkunst* and the picturesque. The picturesque [technically]

encompasses and encourages fragmentation and disruption, contrast and variety, and problematizes the limits of form and conventional expectation; in modern music criticism, however, the term has generally been taken colloquially to describe quaint or pastoral associations or obvious pictorialism. (page 5)

Richards claims that eighteenth-century critics from many different disciplines derived their particular artistic observations from landscape gardening.

The new garden ideal drew on the irregularities of natural landscape, with its woods, rocks and rugged waterfalls—a ‘natural’ aesthetic . . . called for contrast, surprises and partial concealments in garden art, as opposed to the predictable regularities and symmetrical patterns of the old formal garden. (page 9)

Like the landscape garden, fantasias tenuously balance between the extremes of the beautiful and the sublime. They idle between underlying coherence and surface disruption. Richards points out that though central to contemporary musical conceptions, the influence of the picturesque aesthetic has been overlooked in recent scholarship on eighteenth-century music.

Predicated on a dialectical engagement with the natural and the artificial, and its predilection for irregularity, unruly freedom and ambiguous borders, the picturesque was, and is, an important tool for the conceptualization of contemporary instrumental music, and especially that period’s most ambiguous genre, the free fantasia. (page 6)

Looking through the lens of the picturesque aesthetic allows for a new way of listening to the fantasia and understanding its peculiarities through precisely the startling and disruptive elements that have baffled critics.

Resituating the fantasia within a broader, more picturesque, conception of the eighteenth-century musical imagination offers the present-day performer and listener the opportunity for a new and lively engagement with this music which, in its resistance to notation and its intrinsic instability might offer us—as it offered educated listeners of the period—an unruly and rewarding way to hear anew even the more ‘ordered’ masterpieces of the late eighteenth-century canon. (page 100)

[5] Richards’ study focuses primarily on the fantasias of C.P.E. Bach and also deals with the fantasias and *fantasie* procedures of works by Haydn and Beethoven. She recreates the picturesque aesthetic for the late eighteenth-century fantasia through a rigorous and well-documented historical account, showing its derivation from landscape gardening. She cites an abundance of contemporary appearances of the veiled Isis (a symbol of Nature concealed, often included in art, monuments, the frontispieces of books, etc.), and establishes that much of the contemporary criticism incorporated metaphors articulated through picturesque vocabulary.

A straight road is the most agreeable, because it shortens the journey. But in an embellished field, a straight walk has an air of formality and confinement; and at any rate is less agreeable than a winding or waving walk; for in surveying the beauties of an ornamented field, we love to roam from place to place at freedom. Winding walks have another advantage: at every step they open new views. In short, the walks in a pleasure ground ought not to have the appearance of a road: my intention is not to make a journey, but to feast my eye on the beauties of art and nature. (page 63)

The fantasia, like the picturesque garden, is confined (i.e. uses borders and margins), but the confinement is deliberately concealed—an artfully constructed illusion. Both the landscaped garden and the fantasia are art forms of constant retrospection and reevaluation from different vantage points and levels of distance.

[6] Richards engages contrasting contemporary aesthetic viewpoints. Carl Friedrich Cramer characterized the fantasia with

the term, *Aussichten*, or organization from afar of multiple glimpses from different angles. In *Allgemeine Theorie*, Sulzer argued for a ‘unified whole out of Nature’s diversity and multiplicity,’ for both music and *Gartenkunst*—a theoretical model for the *Originalgenie*. Conversely, the aesthetic theories of Johann Friedrich Reichardt discouraged sudden disjunctions and extreme mixtures of affect as symptomatic of empty virtuosity. Though he praised Haydn’s and C.P.E. Bach’s music as radical transformations in musical thought, these composers could get away with such fanciful compositions only because of their supreme genius and artful handling of disparate musical elements. Richards brings in critical writings on contemporary painting in order to assemble a more general aesthetic of the picturesque that subsumed all of the arts. She invokes the contemporary philosophy of Kant, who claimed that landscape gardening is more closely related to the fantasia than to painting because it is experienced gradually through time, unlike a painting which is static.

[7] What appeared so irregular for the fantasia was its fundamental independence of usual thematic process, harmonic plan, or rhythmic structure. The fantasia relied on a variety of thematic ideas rather than the manipulation and development of a single theme. However, Schenker, in ‘The Art of Improvisation’ commented that

we see that Bach persists in the most precise orderliness even in the diminution of a free fantasia, and he conceals this orderliness purely for the sake of the fantasia under the guise of disorder; it is precisely this which constitutes the inimitable of his art. (page 42)

The Eb major (H. 277) and A major (H. 278) fantasias from C.P.E. Bach’s *Kenner und Liebhaber* collections incorporate a wealth of seemingly unrelated ideas and quick, disorienting modulations that often utilize the fully diminished seventh chord. Each one is based on a governing tripartite structure of unmeasured outer sections contrasted with a measured, dance-like middle section. Both of these fantasias end with a reprise of the opening material. Musical fragments are reused, reorganized, and reharmonized, which calls into question what is spontaneous and what is composed, or what is concealed. There is a balance between coherence and incoherence in these pieces. The continuous recasting of musical fragments suggests an active engagement by both composer and listener alike, where musical materials in the present are interpreted and reinterpreted in light of what has come before. ‘Though there is madness, yet there’s method in it.’

[8] Richards claims that the picturesque qualities of music—the fantastic and unexpected—draw our attention to the conscious act of listening. The fantasia is an active process for both the composer/performer and the listener. Thus, the fantasia demands informed and interpretive listening on the part of the audience. An important element of this aesthetic is silence, which often creates fragmentation and unpredictability. Silence demands interpretation on the part of the listener, and reinterpretation once the music resumes. Richards’ insightful analyses of the C.P.E. Bach fantasias illustrate how Bach engaged in flights of fancy after abrupt silences, playing on listener expectations. At these moments we find a ‘dialogic engagement between performer and listener,’ (page 98) an important turning point in musical aesthetics: imaginative listening. Richards cites Cramer and his metaphor of the cloudscape—the fantasia latent with potential meanings. Cramer valued the ‘contingent and the disruptive as opportunities for imaginative play by the listener,’ meaningful despite its apparent incoherence (page 100). Here the interpretive ambiguity is an asset, and an obvious link to emerging Romantic aesthetics.

[9] Richards claims that C.P.E. Bach was well versed in the aesthetics of landscape gardening and provides evidence that Bach enjoyed revealing the hidden structure of the Potsdam gardens to his friends. More significantly, she claims that C.P.E. Bach was an integral member of the intellectual circles of Hamburg that were responsible for disseminating the aesthetics of sentimentality and humor.

Indeed, the picturesque elevated the comic to new heights, with important ramifications for the reception of German instrumental music towards the end of the eighteenth century. It was precisely the complex amalgam of sublimity and comedy in Haydn’s music of the 1790s that appealed to his London audiences (page 143).

[10] Richards also raises issues between the public and private spheres of music. She claims that C.P.E. Bach’s music is evocative because it balances both *empfindsamkeit* (sentiment) and *einsamkeit* (solitude). She cites Johann Georg Zimmermann’s notion that solitude is necessary not just for self-expression, but also for self-examination, resulting in higher self-awareness by throwing off the chains of convention. She ties in the picturesque aesthetic, where ‘the English garden stood as the central metaphor in North German culture for the mediation between the private and public spheres’ (page 171). Thus the landscape garden becomes a public space where one has imaginative freedom.

[11] Richards problematizes the tension, claiming that C.P.E. Bach made ‘many compromises in providing music for general

consumption, and that in only a small number of pieces written for himself had he been able to be truly free' (page 175). However, 'fantasias were difficult, uncompromising and private, and Bach's statements emphasize solitary performance and understanding of this music over its public reception, while hinting at the contradictions inherent in its commodification' (page 175). Significantly, C.P.E. Bach arranged his final fantasia—*C.P.E. Bachs Empfindungen*—for clavichord and accompanying violin, with overt allusions and concessions to the accompanied violin sonata, the most fashionable genre of the day. Richards argues that C.P.E. Bach created an ironic commentary on the most public of genres being accompanied by the most private of genres. It is in examples of this sort that Richards masterfully elucidates C.P.E. Bach's musical wit—thumbing his nose at the conventions of the day by artfully employing them.

[12] Like C.P.E. Bach and Haydn, Beethoven loved to walk in the Viennese gardens and knew well the contrasting French and English aesthetics of landscape gardening. Moreover, Czerny referred to the picturesque as a metaphor for the dialectic between freedom and formal coherence in Beethoven's sonatas. Under Richards' model, the 'oddities' of Beethoven's *quasi un fantasia* sonatas can be 'explained' as fantastical elements infiltrating conventional sonata procedures.

The winding paths of a landscape garden that appear to mislead are part of a coherent and inexorable, if mysterious, programme. Likewise, the moments of obscurity and bafflement in a sonata by Beethoven are central to the experience of the work and to its overall plan (page 212).

She analyzes Sonata Op. 101, where 'sudden dislocation and erring attention threaten to negate the forward drive that underlies the teleology of form' (page 206). *Fantasia* elements threaten to tear the sonata form asunder. In an 1815 *AmZ* article, Amadeus Wendt attests to the problem of coherence in Beethoven's sonatas caused by fantasia interruptions. There is a tension between pleasure and rationality, where the fantasia is both 'potentially marvelous' and 'potentially meaningless' (page 207). And yet the metaphor of the picturesque ties in well with Beethoven's Romantic sensibilities of sudden disruption and contrast. 'The difficult musical patches make the sweet spots even sweeter' (page 190).

[13] Richards' picturesque aesthetic proves to be a useful tool to model the eighteenth-century fantasia. She rightly characterizes the *fantasie* aesthetic as a process of invention and elaboration. She develops Sulzer's and Koch's ideas to describe the fantasia as a compositional *process* rather than a *work*. It might prove fruitful to question our anachronistic nineteenth-century notions of 'the work,' especially when confronted with eighteenth-century pieces that, in many respects, defy this notion.

[14] Richards' book leaves a few unanswered questions. First, though she deals well with the fantasias of C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven, she is silent on Mozart's fantasias. Second, Richards' study falters in its deference to the sonata. Time and time again Richards compares C.P.E. Bach fantasias to our conceptions of sonata form and its procedures. A fantasia is not a sonata. Shouldn't it be judged on its own merits, not compared and contrasted with a markedly different genre? She effectively locates the fantasia as an 'imperfect art' in relation to the sonata. Moreover, the teleology of her narrative leads the reader, in the final chapters, to Beethoven's late sonatas. I feel as if she implies a 'progress' from C.P.E. Bach's 'less perfect' fantasias to Beethoven's 'more perfect' sonatas. Finally, affects and the arrangement of an affective structure within a piece were central to the eighteenth-century understanding of music.⁽⁹⁾ I think that an account of the discourse on affect and its relationship to the aesthetics of the picturesque might enrich Richards' argument.

[15] In conclusion, Richards' metaphor of the picturesque provides a historically-based aesthetic method by which we can better understand the music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially the music of C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven. Moreover, it complements the research done thus far in the realms of theory of form, semiotics, rhetoric, and musical witticism. To suggest further research in this area, it might be interesting to see if the Schubert and Schumann fantasias hold up to the same picturesque aesthetic, or if new aesthetics had taken hold for the nineteenth-century fantasia.

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Footnotes

1. Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Ausführliche Redekunst* (Leipzig: B.C. Breitkopf, 1736), 193.

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2. Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Provinces* (London: T. Beckett, J. Robson and G. Robinson, 1773. Reprint of 2nd ed., 1775).

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3. C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, 2 vols. (Vol. 1, Berlin: C.F. Henning, 1753; Vol. 2, Berlin: G.L. Winter, 1762).

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4. J. G. Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: M. C. Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1786–7). H. C. Koch, *Musikalisches Lexikon* (Frankfurt, 1802. Reprint, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung Hildesheim, 1964).

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5. Heinrich Schenker, *Ein Beitrag zur Ornamentik. Als Einführung zu Ph. E. Bachs Klavierwerken* (Vienna: Universal, 1908).

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6. Charles Rosen, *The Classic Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (London: Faber, 1971); Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980); Joel Lester, *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

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7. Mark Evan Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Elaine Sisman, ed., *Haydn and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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8. See Magrini, “Improvisation and Group Interaction in Italian Lyrical Singing,” in Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell, ed., *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, ed. Philip V. Bohlman and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), page 170.

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9. See Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983); also, Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Thomas Christensen, ed. and trans., *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition in the German Enlightenment: Selected Writings of Johann Georg Sulzer and Heinrich Christoph Koch*, Cambridge Studies in Music Theory and Analysis, ed. Ian Bent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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