



Composers, performers, and notation: solo music notations in Europe, 1500–1700

Robert F. Judd



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ABSTRACT: Work in progress: a synopsis of an interdisciplinary study examining the movement in western art music from primarily aural to primarily written media. The study, now in its formative stages, emphasizes the semiological, performative, and cultural aspects of the shift.

[1] The point of departure for this study is the conceptual conflict I find in the change of performance traditions of solo music in Europe: about 1500, solo music was something inherently transitory, “composed” as it was first played, never heard the same way again; but by 1700, it had become something relatively permanent, recorded on paper and intended to be performed again and again by someone who did not necessarily have compositional experience. The significance of the conflict might be stated in communicative terms as the paradigmatic change from “composer-performer → listener” to “composer → text → performer → listener.” The musician that created and performed at the same time was replaced by a composer/performer dichotomy mediated by “text” or notation. I wish to focus on notation as the area of investigation for determining why the change took place, and the implications for cultural history that follow from conclusions regarding the change.

[2] The area of solo music is best suited for such an investigation: beyond a certain point ensemble music had to be written down to be performed, whereas few such restrictions limited the freedom of an individual musician in performance. Individuals had no need for mediation of any sort when performing, unlike even those ensembles that used oral or visual signs to communicate synchronous events to members. Solo music is limited to instruments: music for organ, harpsichord, lute, harp, etc. The change from 1500 to 1700 regarding the aesthetic valuation of vocal versus instrumental music is thus coincident with the distinction between composer and performer first identified: the history of the solo sonata has roots in the same basic conflict symbolized in the use of notation.

[3] The study follows on from my doctoral dissertation, “The Use of Notational Formats at the Keyboard” (Oxford, 1989; UMI# 90-18544), in which I surveyed Italian and Spanish keyboard music and writings on music notation from about 1500 to 1700, and found a striking contemporary concern for notation and its implications for performance. Coinciding with the rise of printed music as a medium, a wide variety of notational experiments were undertaken, most accompanied by polemic for their own approach and against competitive approaches. I identified and described many of these, but the study lacked

breadth and coherence of repertory, and I was unable to assimilate the interdisciplinary background necessary for tackling conceptual issues in full. I now intend to explore the implications of the conflicts and changes I identified along three conceptual lines of investigation: the semiotic, the performative, and the cultural, with the latter assuming most importance.

[4] The creation of systems of notation merits exploration, for to understand the purpose of the notations one must first understand their semiological foundations. Notation systems were devised for an apparently societal end: to enable participation in a socially valuable activity for those willing to take the necessary effort learn the system and implement it physically on their instrument. An awareness arose that musical performance need not be restricted to those with innate (often referred to as “miraculous” in contemporary documents) abilities, but could be learned by all. The apparently inexplicable ability of certain individuals to perform well was a very real phenomenon, but it became possible to imitate innate ability to some degree through development of technique and use of notation. Some contemporary writers viewed this as a gross act of deception: to sound as if one were a great performer- composer merely by performing the notated version of another’s work. Related textual questions such as the impact of music printing on the development of solo notations are significant but under-explored. Textual examination of manuscripts and printed works leads to information about the users of the sources and their needs; the way the texts were used also has implications for appreciating the status of text in performance. The assessment of the use of notations has a semiological but also social facet.

[5] To recognize the element of performance in the music communication-paradigm is to call for a consideration of its implications. Conceptual discussions of notation often point to its importance as a tool for the memory or synchronization of ensembles, but another aspect, the human need for re-creation or re-enactment, is at least as significant. Notation as a record of “art-moments” valuable enough to be re-enacted thus assumes importance in terms of history and concepts of time. Indeed, a change in historicism coincident with the period under investigation may be easily seen: Johannes Tinctoris (1477) voiced an opinion that was prevalent in his day, that no music more than thirty years old was worth performing; but by 1672, Lorenzo Penna recommended study of keyboard music printed in 1543. The solo repertory is an ideal vehicle to address the problem this change poses.

[6] Both text- and performance-oriented investigations are subsumed under the heading of cultural history. The social role of personal music underwent enormous changes in this period, and the influence of notation on personal choices, desires, and goals is fundamental; exploring the interaction between notation and individuals means looking at a human system of code, its passage through technological revolution (printing) and market forces (the goals of the publisher), to the needs of users.

[7] The general approach I propose is unusual. Virtually no studies isolate solo music; nor have they viewed the far-reaching implications of the historical phenomenon of solo music notation. My interdisciplinary research in textual criticism, bibliography, printing technology, semiology, performance studies, and anthropology is in its early stages, and my eventual conclusions are to some extent unknown; none the less, I believe these questions are worth in-depth exploration.

Robert F. Judd
42 University Mews
Philadelphia PA 19104
robert_judd@csufresno.edu

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