

MATTHESON'S TWELVE SUITES OF 1714: CLUES TO THE EXECUTION OF RHYTHM IN GERMAN BAROQUE SUITES

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Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) is a familiar name to most people interested in German music of the baroque. His writings survived due to their publication, but only a small quantity of his music now exists to attest to his qualities as a composer. For players of 18th-century keyboard music, he ought to have a particular attraction: the twelve suites for keyboard entitled *Harmony's Monument*, which he published as two sets of six suites in 1714, were a spur to his one-time colleague and friend, Handel, to publish his own collection in England in 1720.

This article focuses upon an important feature of Mattheson's suites: they may offer an insight into the execution of rhythm. He employed notational devices similar to some used by Handel (but not found in the music of their contemporary, J S Bach) which offer clues about the existence of conventions concerning the performance of rhythm in allemandes and courantes. The controversy over the use or non-use of such conventions beyond the borders of France is still alive, and has been a focus of attention for this author for many years.

Mattheson's personality

Mattheson was an extrovert and a multi-talented man, fluent in several languages, both ancient and modern; he was also a noted dancer, fencer, horseman and a fashionable beau. Undoubtedly good company, he was far from self-effacing, as is clear from his own voluminous writings, many of which centre upon himself.

These accomplishments are more likely to make a man famous in his own time than to cause him to be revered by later generations. Nevertheless, Mattheson's stated mission was to improve music in his native land, not only by performance and through compositions of his own, but by recommendation, instruction, and discussion; hence his contributions through writing and teaching.

As a musician, Mattheson was precocious. In his teens he was not only a virtuoso organist, but a soprano soloist in the Hamburg Opera. He graduated to become a successful tenor too, sometimes performing in operas written by himself. But in 1705, at the age of 24, he abandoned this career, thereafter choosing less exposed musical activities, and a secure living as secretary to the English ambassador (he was also to take an English wife). This change of direction was almost certainly the result of severe deafness, to which he succumbed at an early age.

This did not prevent his becoming one of the leading organists of his day. He also composed a considerable amount of music: solo and chamber works, operas and church music. His books (written in an informal and entertaining style, and still widely read in Germany today) helped to build his reputation as one of Hamburg's, if not Germany's, leading musical personalities.¹ Many of Mattheson's compositions were lost during the



Illus.1. Johann Mattheson, detail from a copper engraving by Johann Jakob Haid (c.1744) after a painting by Johann Salomon Wahl. André Meyer Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

bombing of his native city during World War II, although a considerable amount of his music was returned to Hamburg in 1998 from Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia; this music is now being re-examined.

The Twelve Suites

As was normal for the time, Mattheson published only a few musical works, one of which was the Twelve Suites (subtitled in Germany *Harmonisches Denckmahl*, or *Harmony's Monument*) which appeared simultaneously in Hamburg and London in 1714. As young men in their twenties, Handel and Mattheson had been close friends, and Handel, who was now increasingly to be found in London, is described as retiring with a copy of the new suites to the nearest harpsichord, and playing them right through at a single sitting, a task which would have required at least two and a half hours.²

The suites present a huge variety of mood and style, but Mattheson nevertheless displays a distinct musical personality. Unsurprisingly, he also demonstrates familiarity with the music of his contemporaries and forebears, Johann Jakob Froberger, Johann Kühnau and Georg Böhm. Mattheson borrows movements in his Suite no.12 directly from Böhm's music, presenting them in a modified form as the basis for his own variations.³ What was originally a short, insubstantial piece by Böhm becomes something of much greater stature when amplified by Mattheson.

Tunes are the element most likely to be borrowed by another composer, but despite the example of borrowing just mentioned, Mattheson shows himself a natural and individual melodist, even within keyboard music. Particularly attractive tunes are to be found in his *Airs* – movements inserted among the basic dances of the baroque suite. But Mattheson is unusual in his natural ability to infuse sarabandes, minuets, in fact all the customary dances, with attractive melody.

The suites are further enlivened by the presence of a number of rather good musical jokes – a very unusual feature. The most extended is an entire 'bad' fugue, placed before the start of Suite 11. Unlike the fine fugues published by Mattheson in his collection *Die wohlklingende Fingersprache*,⁴ this one incorporates numerous clichés, false key-relations, and blatant examples of bad, juvenile composition. It almost completely runs out of ideas by line 5, and barely manages to return to the original subject at the end.

The 1714 published version of the suites presents relatively few problems as far as the actual reading of the notes is concerned, but it sometimes seems a little disorganised, and for rigorous and careful presentation it cannot compare with, for example, Bach's *Clavierübung*. Unlike Bach, Mattheson was reluctant to be prescriptive: the suites contain anomalies and inconsistencies, and he even used a favourite sarabande twice (in the two D minor suites, nos. 2 and 8). But compared with the music of his contemporaries, the suites are modern, original and advanced both in technique and musical content. In their combination of variety of mood and attractive tunefulness, they exceed most offered by other composers before him.

The rather early date of their publication is quite remarkable. It is almost certain that Bach would have owned a copy, and this raises intriguing possibilities. Did the arrangement of pieces in different styles influence Bach in his compilation of the *Partitas*? Did the late use of duple notation in the *gigue* of Mattheson's Suite no.3 inspire Bach to an even later exploitation of this technique in the two culminating pieces of *Partita* no.6?⁵

A neglected genius

Mattheson's suites are now rarely performed in concerts. The most probable reasons are twofold: the first is the low profile which Mattheson himself suffers today. In fact, increasing numbers of players enjoy playing the suites in private, since the facsimile of the 1714 edition is quite inexpensive, and generally legible.⁶ The second is a problem which this article hopes to address to some extent: the considerable reliance placed by Mattheson upon a player's familiarity with notational convention, rather than the expectation of a literal performance of the score.

Furthermore, there are also a considerable number of errors in the first edition of the suites, and some instances of cramped or confusing engraving. The composer himself offered a list of corrections to the edition, but this does not appear in some current issues of the facsimile.⁷ The occasional use of historical clefs may also deter amateurs. Nevertheless, these suites are well worth performing on both the harpsichord and clavichord.⁸

The performance of rhythm

Returning to the notational conventions mentioned above, Mattheson himself has left us clues which may contribute to a greater understanding of appropriate performance techniques, not only for his own music, but also for that of other composers. The question of the intended rhythmic performance of (in particular) certain dances within baroque suites is far from resolved. Indeed, some confident and previously-accepted conclusions reached by such authorities as Robert Donington and Howard Ferguson, based upon a thorough exploration of source material, have in recent years been challenged by a revival of literalism among some performers and scholars.⁹

A literal, or reverential, approach to the notation will view inconsistencies in the presentation of rhythmic detail as intentional.¹⁰ However, I am among those who continue to feel that in many contexts a non-literal performance is not only acceptable but sometimes obligatory; that we should try to enter the mindset of an 18th-century composer rather than read his score with a 21st-century scrupulousness. Mattheson's suites, in general, offer an example of the flexible nature of much baroque music, but they also contain specific clues concerning an approach to performance which may transcend the restrictions of notation.

If one's reaction to a literal performance of rhythmic detail is one of discomfort, prompted by sometimes strange inconsistencies, one may well look out for clues within the score, which might help to establish whether a non-literal performance was intended. Mattheson's suites are an unusually rich source of such clues. One which is used occasionally is 'mixed notation', a term which will be explained shortly. Equally important is a second type of clue: particularly in dance pieces, Mattheson uses notational 'hints' to indicate the expected rhythmic base for the rhythm of a whole piece. Handel used such hints too, favouring dotted pairs of notes to indicate an unequal rhythm.¹¹

Mattheson's method is slightly different, however, and is akin to one employed by Froberger.¹² Like Handel's, the notation is conventional rather than accurate, but there

can be little doubt of its meaning: in the Courante of Suite 1, for example, the three introductory notes are to be played 'short, long, short' (see illus.2).



Illus.2. Mattheson, Suite 1, Courante, opening of second half. All musical examples are from the facsimile of the first edition (London: Fletcher, 1714).

A European practice

A brief summary of the practice of playing in an unequal rhythm may be helpful at this point.¹³ Setting rhythmic hints on one side for a little, let us briefly examine the use of simplified notation of rhythm in general. The use of a widely understood convention concerning rhythm had two advantages for a composer: a less detailed and specific notation reduced labour, since writing a piece in equal notes was easier and faster; it also allowed flexibility of interpretation. The degree and consistency of inequality of rhythm could, indeed perhaps should, be left to the performer, as was the addition of ornaments. Undoubtedly, some players would execute both rhythm and ornaments better than others.

Playing music in a rhythm different from that conveyed by the notation was a longstanding and widespread tradition in European keyboard music, documented throughout two centuries. An extreme example would be material presented in a time signature of 4/4 which could be played either as an allemande or as a gigue, but the phenomenon was far more widespread than this. There is evidence that in baroque music, rhythmic inequality was often not explicitly notated, but left to the player, in Italy and England as well as in Germany.

This can be seen as akin to the more refined and highly-developed convention of *notes inégales* in France. For example, a lilt (within slow movements such as allemandes and sarabandes) and a swung rhythm (in faster pieces such as courantes) were sometimes to be applied by the player even if this is not explicitly indicated on the page. Where the convention was only partially employed (as one finds in the music of some French composers as late as Mattheson's contemporary Louis Marchand),¹⁴ dotted pairs of notes (principally), or groups of notes of unequal value, appear in the score as inconsistent rhythmic elements within a context written largely in notes of equal value.

Sometimes the proportions are reversed, and pairs of equal notes appear in a context presented largely in explicit dotted pairs; it is this practice for which the term 'mixed notation' is used. In some instances a deliberate, or sometimes perhaps an instinctive, use of such motifs served as rhythmic hints which provide a clarification of the

However, where two pieces appear to be in a similar vein, but only one of them employs such hints, we must make a choice. Did the composer simply not opt for such an introduction in one case, expecting nevertheless that an idiomatically unequal rhythm would be applied anyway? Or, on the contrary, did he intentionally write excluding such introductory hints (for example, writing a single note instead) because in this instance he wanted a rhythmically more literal performance? The next two examples illustrate this problem:



Illus.4. Mattheson, Suite 5, Allemande, opening of second half.



Illus.5. Mattheson, Suite 1, Allemande, bars 1-3.

The question may be given some clarification by Mattheson himself, in those pieces which begin with a single upbeat note, but where the second half starts with an explicitly unequal introductory group, as in the courantes of Suites 1 and 3. Even if he was content to let the player wait until the second half for an explicit rhythmic indication, he must have expected this type of rhythm to be applied from the beginning, with the rhythmic hint providing no more than a confirmation of how he intended the movement to be performed.

It is improbable that Mattheson would have written a piece which employed two conflicting rhythms; the only other explanation for this choice of notation is that Mattheson (perhaps in line with common practice) expected a player to glance through the piece in its entirety before starting to play.

The opening of the Allemande of Suite 3 provides an example of a sudden intrusion of explicitly-notated unequal rhythm, occurring during the course of a piece:



Illus.6. Mattheson, Suite 3, Allemande, opening of second half.

In this case, the explicit notation does not occur until the first complete bar of the second half is already under way. As before, it is theoretically possible to isolate the motif and play the surrounding material ‘straight’; however, a parallel motif occurs in the following bar. A more convincing explanation might be that the unequal rhythm was what the composer was hearing all, or most, of the time in his head as he wrote the music down, and from time to time he simply lapsed into a more prescriptive notation. On this assumption, it is easy to make a deductive leap and to conclude that the composer would have approved of an unequal performance-style for some pieces where he left no explicit rhythmic hints at all, an idea which will be considered later.

A crude rhythmic swing?

Mattheson’s hints, even when applied to allemandes, may seem to call for something close to a triplet rhythm, although it is often possible to be more discreet. As for how pervasive this should be, the actual consistency of rhythm which may have been in the composer’s mind is suggested by the following introductory hint, where the more usual motif of three stepwise notes is replaced by a very different group:



Illus.7. Mattheson, Suite 5, Allemande *double*, bars 1-3.

It is still common for the playing of non-French music in an unequal rhythm, where this is accepted at all, to be subject to reservations. These reservations derive from both a determination to make the music sound ‘subtle’, and also from a tendency to follow the recommendations of some French baroque theorists who describe a refined approach to *notes inégales*: the theorists emphasise their suitability for use in stepwise motion, while discouraging inequality in chordal or harmonic passage-work.¹⁶

In the Allemande *double* from Suite 5 (illus.7), Mattheson explicitly notates a swung rhythm within a disjunct, quasi-chordal motif. This might, of course, be simply because

all three-note entries were engraved in this way, whether the composer intended it or not.¹⁷ But Mattheson did not offer a correction of this motif in his list of corrections to the edition, and in any case the parallel hint at the start of the second half is given the same note-values.

This is therefore an example of a swung rhythm within a motif where many would think it less natural than in the surrounding conjunct material. There are significant parallels within the suites of Mattheson's English contemporaries: in their suites, frequent examples of explicit inequality in chordal material can be found. These are generally associated with a vigorous and unequal rhythm applied to English almands, which bear strong similarities to Mattheson's Allemande *double* from Suite 5.¹⁸

The effect of these swung elements within disjunct or chordal material is generally considered unsubtle today. This may suggest either a composer's expectation of a less rhythmically refined performance of the whole piece than our modern 'good taste' might prefer, or perhaps a failure on our part to recognise a particular style of piece, a style which was not thought crude by its composer.

We may therefore return to the opening of the second half of the Allemande from Mattheson's Suite 9 (illus.3). From the second bar we can observe two different types of shorthand at work: firstly, Mattheson carefully notates the first broken chord to show the kind of arpeggiation he desires, yet he then presents the remaining chords in the sequence as simple block chords (surely intended to be broken in the same manner). But secondly, if Mattheson was following the same practice as his English contemporaries, it is possible that even the internal rhythm of those broken chords is meant to be rhythmically bent in order to echo, to some extent, the unequal rhythms of the conjunct material which precedes them.

Further examples of mixed notation

Another indication of an intended swung rhythm can be found in pieces written in a mixed notation. The most easily identifiable form of this is a mixture of equal and dotted pairs, occurring where it does not seem to offer any musically meaningful variety. Again, examples can frequently be found in music by, for example, Purcell and Croft in England, Buxtehude in Germany and Pasquini in Italy, particularly in the pan-European style of vigorous courante/corrente in 3/4.¹⁹

Where the melodic line consists mostly of paired notes, as in this type of courante, an explicit indication of unequal rhythm within a pair can be grammatically indicated only by writing a dotted pair. This indicates, we should remember, a long-short pair, rather than a literal dotted rhythm. Mattheson sometimes indicates unequal rhythm in this way (see illus.8). Could the lapse into equal pairs in bar 4 be an indication of true rhythmic variety? The sudden reduction of rhythmic vitality which this would create makes this interpretation unlikely, and this conclusion is supported by the notation of the second half of the movement, where explicit dotted pairs are used almost entirely throughout. Without reference to the second half, one could regard the start of the piece as an example of a rhythmic hint carried to extremes; perhaps it is.

The presence or absence of mixed notation will depend to some extent on the detailed content of the piece, and we should always look for any meaningful variety.



Illus.8. Mattheson, Suite 3, bars 1-5.

But the argument offered earlier, in favour of the occasional application of a swung rhythm even where no explicit indications occur, might suggest that in pieces of a similar character to the opening of Mattheson's Suite 3 (illus.8), but where the music is written almost or entirely without dotted pairs, a swung rhythm may nevertheless have been expected. Mattheson's suites contain a number of such ambiguous pieces.²⁰

Because of the great variety of movements in Mattheson's suites, only some of them offer the kind of clues so far described. The list below demonstrates that the incidence of rhythmic hints decreases, becoming rare in the second set of six. Is it possible that the composer's compositional style itself underwent a change as he proceeded to assemble the suites?

The following examples of mixed notation give only the most obvious instances:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Allemandes: introductory hints:- | Suite 3, second half, plus mixed notation
Suite 5, both halves; <i>double</i> , both halves
Suite 9, second half |
| Courantes: introductory hints:- | Suite 1, second half; <i>double</i> , both halves
Suite 2, first half, plus mixed notation
Suite 3, second half |

Some conclusions

The most fundamental conclusion is that a literal performance of a piece in which clear rhythmic hints occur would make no musical sense. In these cases at least, the player must infer the rhythmic base for the whole piece from the introduction. A player's taste may decide how pervasive that rhythmic base is to be.

Once the actual notational hints have been taken into account, and those pieces which are clearly in a different idiom (such as inaccurately-titled Italianate Correntes) have been set on one side, there remain some pieces of a similar character to those which carry hints, which a player may be justified in treating as if they did.

The occurrence of odd rhythmically explicit motifs during pieces rather than at their outset, suggests that for Mattheson a conventional rhythmic base, at least in certain types of piece, was not an occasional excursion but a frequent assumption. Instances of similar hints and mixed notation found in the music of Mattheson's contemporaries

suggest that this conventional approach to rhythm was widespread.

Beyond the scope of this short article is the question of a more extended use of rhythmic inequality; Quantz's prescription suggests a wider, more habitual performance practice. The comment by such a sophisticated musician as Quantz that inequality is an element of 'good' playing, might appear to be at odds with the rather bold rhythm explicitly suggested by Mattheson for some of his dance pieces. However, we should observe parallels between English practice and some of Mattheson's music, bearing in mind that Mattheson spent much of his time in England.

Again, French authorities describe employing various degrees of *notes inégales*, from the very subtle to the bold and vigorous, and Quantz was himself a master of the French style. Mattheson's suites are entitled *Pièces de Clavecin*, and all the pieces therein are given fashionable French titles; it would therefore be appropriate to adopt a similar variety of treatment in the suites.

A straightforward, quite literal approach may indeed be suitable for some pieces. For others, as we have seen, a bold, heavy, unequal rhythm may have been expected. But between these extremes, and beyond the capacity of notation, good 18th-century performers would probably have been expected to apply a light, elegant inequality to much of the music which they played.²¹¹

Notes

- ¹ 'Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) was the most important contemporary writer on German Baroque Music.' Preface, *New Mattheson Studies*, ed. Bülow and Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The introduction to this volume points out the fairly recent revival of interest in Mattheson, since it is described as almost the first substantial study since the 1940s.
- ² *New Mattheson Studies*, ch.16, pp.345 ff. Alfred Mann devotes this chapter to 'Mattheson as biographer of Handel'.
- ³ Böhm's original movement is the Sarabande from his Suite no.2 in F minor. See Georg Böhm, *Sämtliche Werke* vol.1, ed. Gesa Wolgast (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1952), EB6634, p.60.
- ⁴ Known in French as *Les Doigts Parlans*, and occasionally in English as *The Talking Fingers*, the edition (Breitkopf, EB5831) is currently out of print. A performance by Andrea Benecke is available from Amazon as an MP3 download.
- ⁵ It has also been argued that a challenge offered to Bach by Mattheson in print may have encouraged the younger man to compose *The Art of Fugue*. See Gregory Butler, *New Mattheson Studies*, p.295.
- ⁶ Mattheson's Suites were originally published in London in 1714 by I D Fletcher. The facsimile of the first edition is issued by Performers' Facsimiles Series 21 (New York), no.86021 (198-?).
- ⁷ The list of corrections can be found at www.daimi.au.dk/~reccmo/scores/mattheson/pieces-de-clavecin/Mattheson.pdf.
- ⁸ A recent edition is now also available: Johann Mattheson, *Pièces de Clavecin*, ed. Jolando Scarpa (Magdeburg: Edition Walhall, 2009), vol.1, Suiten 1-6, EW652; vol.2, Suiten 7-12, EW658. However, there is no editorial commentary; most of the inconsistencies and anomalies present in the original edition remain, and a number of doubtful interpretations of the 1714 score are included. Nevertheless, the modernisation of clefs will be helpful to many.
- ⁹ In the field of keyboard music, the case for observing the conventions underlying much notation in the baroque period is made by myself in Colin Booth, *Did Bach Really Mean That?: Deceptive notation in Baroque keyboard music* (Wells: Soundboard, 2010). See in particular, ch.7: 'Inconsistency of Notation: shorthand, or real variety?'
- ¹⁰ Graham Pont is one leading scholar supporting this view. See, for example, 'Not Vagaries but

Varieties: Handel's "Inconsistencies" authenticated.' The Handel Institute Newsletter, vol.11, no.1. Spring 2000.

- ¹¹ See, for example, the start of Handel's allemande from the 'Great Suite' no.1 in A, and the fugue (movement 2) from the 'Great Suite' in D minor.
- ¹² See Froberger, Suite 6 (1656), opening of *Lamento* (allemande). In this context, the implication of the three note-values used must be no more exact than 'short, long, short'.
- ¹³ For a more extensive introduction to this subject, see the central chapters of *Did Bach really Mean That?*, especially ch.5, parts 1 and 2.
- ¹⁴ Louis Marchand, Suite in D minor, *Chaconne*. This example of mixed notation is illustrated in *Did Bach Really Mean That?*, p.240.
- ¹⁵ Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte Traversiere zu spielen* (1752), ed. and transl. Edward Reilly as *On Playing the Flute* (London: Faber, 1996; 2nd ed. 2001), ch.11, para.12. Importantly, although Quantz may often have desired something more subtle, playing in a triplet rhythm would qualify for his closing stipulation.
- ¹⁶ This can be heard in, for example, the Handel Suites recorded by Sophie Yates, (Handel: Harpsichord Works, vol.2, Suites 1-5, Chandos Chaconne, 2006), where scrupulous attention is given to stepwise motion on the one hand and disjunct material on the other, with rhythmic inequality being applied strictly only to the former.
- ¹⁷ One is certainly so engraved, wrongly. The setter has given the introduction to the Courante of Suite 6 in this way, but the piece is an Italianate Corrente, and he should have given three semiquavers.
- ¹⁸ See William Croft: Suite in C; Jeremiah Clarke: Suite in D minor; Purcell: Suite in G (Z.682).
- ¹⁹ Examples of mixed notation in courantes can be found in Buxtehude: Suite in G minor; Böhm: Suite in D minor; Croft: Suite in C minor; Pasquini: Suite in G minor (Corrente). Mixed notation in allemandes can be found in Handel's suites in D minor and C minor.
- ²⁰ Examples of 'equal' notation in Mattheson carrying the potential for unequal performance (but largely without rhythmic 'hints') include: Suite 1 in D minor, allemande, courante; Suite 3 in D major: courante; Suite 4 in G minor: courante à la Française, Menuet; Suite 5 in C minor: courante; Suite 10 in E minor: allemande, courante; Suite 11 in C major: courante.
- ²¹ A shorter version of this article appeared in *Harpsichord and Fortepiano*, vol.14 no.2, Spring 2010.

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