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# SCHEIBE'S MISTAKE: SUBLIME SIMPLICITY AND THE CRITERIA OF CLASSICISM

KEITH CHAPIN



## ABSTRACT

*It is as a classicist that Johann Adolph Scheibe has entered the annals of music history, either as a propagator of the principles of French literary classicism, or as a champion of a 'galant' style that later critics would view as a foundation for a German musical classicism. But if Scheibe insisted on a quality of striking simplicity, using words clearly indebted to those of Nicolas Boileau, the doyen of seventeenth-century French critics, he was no classicist according to the French model. While all classicists depend to a certain degree on the regulation of their material – for such regulation aids them in their quest for the perfect fit between parts and whole – they will differ in how they choose to balance the codification of technique and the regulation of style, on the one hand, with the evocation of emphatic or 'sublime' experiences, on the other. If Boileau sought the 'marvellous' quality that strikes like lightning, Scheibe wished for clarity. Drawing on scholarship in the history of literature, this article first examines the origins and point of French classicist literary aesthetics, then traces the fate of these aesthetics as they were transferred from France to Germany and from literature to music.*

In the famous and oft-discussed sixth issue of *Der kritische Musikus* (14 May 1737) Johann Adolph Scheibe criticized his former teacher, Johann Sebastian Bach, for the complexity of his polyphony. 'This great man would be the marvel of entire nations, if he had more agreeableness, if he did not rob his music of the natural through a turgid and confused manner, and if he did not darken their beauties through all-too-great art.' The critique is a pendant to Scheibe's praise for the German galant composers of the day, Graun and Hasse (both singled out by name in fictive letters) and his new friend and compatriot in Hamburg, Georg Philipp Telemann. 'The reasonable fire of a *Telemann* has made these foreign genres of music [overtures and vocal choruses] familiar and loved in Germany as well. The French themselves have thus him to thank for a great improvement of their music.'<sup>1</sup> The critique and praise are two expressions of a system of musical values that underpinned many of Scheibe's essays of that year, especially those on invention (Nos 8–9, 11 June and 25 July) and style (Nos 13–15, 20 August to 17 September). The system gave rise to the basic opposition between

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<sup>1</sup> 'Dieser große Mann würde die Bewunderung ganzer Nationen seyn, wenn er mehr Annehmlichkeit hätte, und wenn er nicht seinen Stücken, durch ein schwülstiges und verworrenes Wesen das Natürliche entzöge.' 'Das vernünftige Feuer eines *Telemanns* hat auch in Deutschland diese ausländischen Musikgattungen bekannt und beliebt gemacht; wie ihm denn die Franzosen selbst eine große Verbesserung ihrer Musik zu danken haben.' Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, revised edition (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1745; reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 62, 146–147. Scheibe moved to Hamburg from Leipzig sometime in the winter of 1736–1737. After Telemann's death, Scheibe reported that Telemann had originally planned to participate in the publication of *Der kritische Musikus*, and that he and Telemann had discussed the ideas of the essays before their publication until the composer had left for Paris around the Feast of St Michael's in 1737 (that is, up to the appearance of No. 15 of the *Musikus*). Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Ueber die musikalische Composition: Erster Theil, Die Theorie der Melodie und Harmonie* (Leipzig: Schwickert, 1773), vi–ix. Except where noted, all translations are mine.



the ostensible bombast, turgidity and lack of agreeableness of Bach, on the one hand, and the ‘reasonable fire’ of Telemann, on the other. Scheibe’s outlook on music and life can easily be identified as classicist, directed towards restraint and simplicity and scornful of exuberant display. And it is as a classicist that Scheibe has entered the annals of music history, a proponent of the principles of French classicism after the example of his mentor, Johann Christoph Gottsched, and a spokesperson for the shift in taste towards values of simplicity and restraint that accelerated in Germany as the middle of the century approached.<sup>2</sup>

Yet if Scheibe was a classicist, he was one with whom French classicists would have had little truck. Although Nicolas Boileau advocated restraint and simplicity (which he found in Corneille and Racine) and scorned exuberant display (as he abhorred in the mannerist poetry of Marino), he approached and applied the principles of classicism in a markedly different manner. This article, first, revisits the transmission of classicist doctrine from France to Germany, emphasizing the discontinuity between seventeenth-century French and early eighteenth-century German approaches to principles of simplicity. Second, to differentiate between these two approaches, it investigates an ineradicable tension essential to the viability of classicist doctrine.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, artists and pedagogues use the maxim of simplicity to codify and regulate their techniques, to avoid a profusion that might lead towards mannerist disjunction. On the other, they use the same maxim to validate the striking effect of a well wrought work, to emphasize the overwhelming or sublime force that the work should bring to bear upon the recipient. In other words, the principle of simplicity and classicist doctrine in general can be applied to different aspects of the creative process, to the regulation of means or to the creation of emphatic effects. At stake is the balance between the prescriptive and the ineffable so important to any pedagogical method or creative process. Third and finally, the article interprets both Scheibe’s critique of Bach and his homage to Telemann as a one-sided application of classicist doctrine, as an over-emphasis on standardization and the regulative.

The point of classicism can best be understood through a look at the origins and the fate of the ideal of sublime simplicity, a history that revolved around the way that pedagogical prescriptions and ineffable effects were measured against each other in different forms of classicism.<sup>4</sup> In the transmission of classicist doctrine from France to Germany and from poetry to music early in the eighteenth century, there was a shift

2 See, for example, Georgia Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600–1750* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1981), 126–127.

3 The distinction made here was inspired by that of Ernst Robert Curtius between *Idealklassik* and *Normalklassik*, ideal classicism and standard classicism. To define the second term, he argues ‘By this term I designate all authors and periods which write correctly, clearly, and in accordance with the rules, without representing the highest human and artistic values. . . . Standard Classicism is imitable and teachable. It is of advantage to the economy of a literature if a large stock of such goods is available. But the situation is alarming if the literature does not maintain a consciousness of the difference in level (which is at the same time a difference in essence) – and this should be the task of criticism.’ The distinction is useful, though Curtius gives the qualitative power that distinguishes the *Idealklassik* an anthropological-metaphysical dimension that needs to be taken with much salt. If he is right to note that certain artists manage to rise above the normative use of rules, he places uncritical faith in the significance of these effects when he writes that they represent the ‘the highest human and artistic values’. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 274; *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, eleventh edition (Bern: Francke, 1993), 278.

4 Aside from specialized articles cited later, this overview of the idea of sublime simplicity is informed by the following studies on the literary and philosophical discourse of sublimity: Karl Viëtor, ‘Die Idee des Erhabenen in der deutschen Literatur’, in *Geist und Form: Aufsätze zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Bern: Francke, 1952), 234–266; Carsten Zelle, ‘Angenehmes Grauen’: *Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987); Carsten Zelle, ‘Schönheit und Erhabenheit: Der Anfang doppelter Ästhetik bei Boileau, Dennis, Bodemer und Breitinger’, in *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn*, ed. Christine Pries (Weinheim: Acta humaniora, 1989), 55–73; Baldine Saint Girons, *Le sublime de l’antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2005). Classicism is understood here as an aesthetic or sensibility that both asks for the creation of emphatic ‘sublime’ effects, through the matching of parts within a whole, and is opposed to a mannerist aesthetic in which parts stand for themselves. Although I accept the distinction, I make no claim for any superiority of classicism over mannerism.



of interest from the creation of powerful effects to the regulation and codification of technique. It is a shift that has gone unnoted in the most frequently cited studies on the transfer of French aesthetic theory to Germany.<sup>5</sup> To recuperate the point of this classicist doctrine, it is helpful to begin with two ancient origins.

The origin of the stylistic principle of simplicity is most familiar. In ancient rhetoric, the speaker had three stylistic levels to choose from: high (sublime), middle and low (humble). While the high, or sublime, style used elaborate metaphors and tropes to move the passions of the recipient, the middle used metaphors and tropes more sparingly and strove to persuade, and the low, or humble, style chose the path of simplicity to affect a studied naïveté. However, from the time of the Renaissance European intellectuals began to attend to the special power of the humble style. In 1580 and 1581, for instance, Marc-Antoine Muret gave courses at the Jesuit College in Rome on Tacitus. Muret argued that Tacitus' *genus humile* produced a sacred *frisson* in readers through sublime *chiaroscuro*.<sup>6</sup> The rhetorical *genus humile* provided the foundation for classicist doctrine, especially in France, for it allowed writers and critics to formulate stylistic principles of simplicity and restraint, especially in sacred discourse (as practised by Bossuet), epistolary prose (as cultivated in the circle of Guez de Balzac) and tragedy (as praised in the dramas of Corneille).<sup>7</sup>

Classicist doctrine was not just about style, as the teaching of Muret suggests. The ideal of *sublime* simplicity had an unlikely and often overlooked origin in a famous line in *Peri hupsous* (*On the Sublime*, or, more literally, *On Height*).<sup>8</sup> In the closing words of the first chapter, the first-century Greek critic traditionally called Longinus wrote, 'Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude'.<sup>9</sup> The image of the lightning bolt carries with it a range of implications that go far to constitute the tradition of discourse on sublimity.<sup>10</sup> Of primary importance are the suddenness of the experience and a particular emphatic character in which recipients feels transported beyond a normal mode of life.<sup>11</sup> Although Longinus offered later writers a vital source for the discussion of sudden, transporting experiences, he was by no means the first to interest himself in them. Baldine Saint Girons has traced the discourse to Plato's parable of the cave, though it is hard to

5 When Wolfgang Stammler, for example, discusses the influence of French classicists on Johann Christoph Gottsched, he fails to note the changing function of the concept of noble simplicity in different versions of classicism: 'Von den Franzosen übernahm zuerst Gottsched Wort und Begriff und schloß sich, wie bekannt genug, ihrer künstlerischen Theorie gänzlich an.' Such are the perils of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Claudia Henn offers a more nuanced study of this transfer, but still fails to note how concepts of simplicity and compulsion could be variously brought to bear on the artistic process. Wolfgang Stammler, "'Edle Einfalt": Zur Geschichte eines kunsttheoretischen Topos', in *Worte und Werte: Bruno Markwardt zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Gustav Erdmann and Alfons Eichstaedt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1961), 369; Claudia Henn, *Simplizität, Naivität, Einfalt: Studien zur ästhetischen Terminologie in Frankreich und in Deutschland 1674–1771* (Zurich: Juris, 1974).

6 Marc Fumaroli, 'Rhétorique d'école et rhétorique adulte: remarques sur la réception européenne du *Traité du Sublime* au XVIe et au XVIIe siècles', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 1 (1986), 45.

7 Sophie Hache, *La langue du ciel: Le sublime en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 398 and passim.

8 Other derivations of the principle of sublime simplicity come from medieval scholasticism (the simplicity of God) and were strong in German Pietism. See Stammler, "'Edle Einfalt'", 362–368.

9 W. Rhys Roberts, *Longinus on the Sublime: The Greek Text Edited after the Paris Manuscript* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 43. The treatise was once thought to be by the third-century Greek statesman Longinus, a councillor to the pharaohs of Egypt. Although it is now ascribed to an otherwise unknown Greek writer of the first century, scholars continue to call the writer Longinus (rather than Pseudo-Longinus) for reasons of convenience and stylistic elegance.

10 The image of the lightning bolt appears at several points in the treatise, such as to describe the effects of Demosthenes' speeches, and was common in Greek and Roman criticism. Nicholas Cronk, *The Classical Sublime: French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* (Charlottesville: Rockwood, 2002), 167–168.

11 The power of the experience often elicited metaphysical meditations on its source – whether attributed to God, nature or human genius – though, as Rhys Roberts noted long ago, Longinus did not himself embark on the path. Roberts, *Longinus on the Sublime*, 23.



imagine that he was the first to speak of something so fundamental.<sup>12</sup> Rather, Longinus earned his place in the history of criticism through the prominence he gave to this particular species of emphatic effect, through the metaphors he coined to talk about this effect, through the examples he gave (which later constituted an almost obligatory canon that writers could interpret in ever new ways) and, finally and most importantly for the present purpose, through a measured scepticism towards artistic norms.

While all writers on rhetoric straddled the inherent tensions of sublimity – between teachable means and unteachable gift, first, and between turgidity and sublimity, second – Longinus insisted to an unprecedented degree on the ‘gift of discourse’. In his enumeration of the sources of ‘elevated language’, he defined five sources of sublimity. These included two innate capacities (‘the power of forming great conceptions’ and ‘vehement and inspired passion’) and three ‘products of art’ (figures of thought and expression, diction and ‘dignified and elevated composition’). ‘Beneath these five varieties there lies, as though it were a common foundation, the gift of discourse, which is indispensable.’<sup>13</sup> The practical result of his fascination for the gift was that he devoted himself over the pages of his treatise to criticism far more than to pedagogy. He showed how various writers who achieved sublimity – Homer, in particular, but also Demosthenes, Pindar, Sappho and others – had disobeyed rules of grammar and prosody but had yet managed to produce works of greater power than writers who followed the rules. It was this innate capacity or gift that allowed them to succeed, despite their neglect of the codified principles that normally permitted artists to speak or write well. As he wrote,

I have myself noted not a few errors on the part of Homer and other writers of the greatest distinction, and the slips they have made afford me anything but pleasure. Still I do not term them willful errors, but rather oversights of a random and casual kind, due to neglect and introduced with all the heedlessness of genius. Consequently I do not waver in my view that excellences higher in quality, even if not sustained throughout, should always on a comparison be voted the first place, because of their sheer elevation of spirit if for no other reason. Granted that Apollonius in his *Argonautica* shows himself a poet who does not trip, and that in his pastorals Theocritus is, except in a few externals, most happy, would you not, for all that, choose to be Homer rather than Apollonius?<sup>14</sup>

The negligence characteristic of distinguished spirits was a motif taken up later in diverse forms in pedagogies of both behaviour and art: in the Renaissance as noble *sprezzatura*, and later as a galant avoidance of compulsive erudition. Although such negligence served to mark an aristocratic lifestyle in which hard work was anathema, it also had a far more important function in systems of pedagogy, whether of manners or of artistic technique. It served to relativize codified norms, to assure that the emulation of models did not fall into rigid application and, in effect, to ensure that the pedagogies did not fall prey to their own strengths.<sup>15</sup>

It was in part to address the priority given to the effect that principles of simplicity and sublimity merged, though ‘sublimity’ was now applied to quite different literary techniques. When Nicolas Boileau issued his influential call for simplicity in the Introduction to his *Traité du sublime, ou du merveilleux dans le discours, traduit du grec de Longin* (1674), he took up much the same basic question as Longinus – the necessity of measuring technical prescriptions against aesthetic effects – but formulated it as a critique of the luxuriant high style practised by seventeenth-century orators, not as a call for freedom from technical

12 Saint Girons, *Le sublime de l'antiquité à nos jours*, 18–25.

13 Roberts, *Longinus on the Sublime*, 57–59.

14 Roberts, *Longinus on the Sublime*, 129.

15 For an analysis of competing processes of ‘civilization’ as developed in French manuals on conversation and behaviour, one oriented towards the inculcation of norms and one oriented towards a ‘free’ sociability, see Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), chapter 3.



prescriptions.<sup>16</sup> In words later often paraphrased, as will be seen with Scheibe, Boileau contrasted what he called 'the Sublime' with the sublime style.

Il faut donc sçavoir que par Sublime, Longin n'entend pas ce que les Orateurs appellent le stile sublime: mais cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enleve, ravit, transporte. Le stile sublime veut toujours de grands mots; mais le Sublime se peut trouver dans une seule pensée, dans une seule figure, dans un seul tour de paroles.<sup>17</sup>

It should be recognized that, by Sublime, Longinus does not mean what orators call the sublime style, but rather that extraordinary and marvellous quality in language that strikes and that ensures that a work elevates, ravishes and transports. The sublime style always wants grand words, but the Sublime can be found in a single thought, in a single figure, in a single turn of phrase.

As had Longinus, Boileau insisted on the suddenness of the sublime experience (it could be communicated by a single idea, figure or turn of phrase) and on its power to transport (a marvellous quality that 'strikes', much as a lightning bolt). The *genus humile* achieved its apotheosis as the true sublime.

However, Boileau's call for simplicity should not be misunderstood, for he aimed at least as much at the misuse of elaborate language as he did at elaborate language per se. Although Boileau eventually entered royal service as historiographer to King Louis XIV, he began his career as a critic of the writers and orators engaged in loquacious panegyrics to the king. Boileau was joined in his battle by other 'Ancients' in the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, especially Jean Racine and Jean de La Fontaine. At the beginnings of their careers, these three writers formed with Molière the *Société des quatre amis*, a workgroup of sorts dedicated to literature 'that strikes'. After Louis XIV arrested their patron, the superintendent Nicolas Fouquet, for fraud and treason (the official charges) and for *lèse-majesté* (the actual crime) in 1661, the personal ties between the four writers loosened as they charted different paths through the brambles of cultural politics that followed. Yet they all worked together towards literature that would strike the reader with particular power. Although it was and is frequently misread, French classicism lay less in the rules than in the emphatic quality that these authors achieved with their work. As Jules Brody noted in a classic study of Boileau's poetics,

Longinus' Sublime, that inner essence which rivets the attention, was for Boileau 'la souveraine perfection du discours'. His concepts of genre and style, his insistence on naturalness and simplicity, his notion of Tragedy, and his manner of translating the Ancients all were calculated to conserve that perfection and to keep the emotive effects of literature undisturbed, intense, and pure. Every element in Boileau's critical strategy, like his commitment to the Sublime, was born of this impulse.<sup>18</sup>

Longinus provided Boileau with an ancient author and a powerful concept that could both buttress his call for literary quality and balance his pedagogical guidelines on how to achieve such effects.

Recent scholarship by French cultural and literary historians has done much to complicate the widespread and persistent prejudice that Boileau and other French classicists were dry academicians, at pains to enforce strict adherence to rules in the arts and to celebrate strict adherence to monarchical authority. In a study on Jean de La Fontaine, Marc Fumaroli has sketched the complex personal alliances and political

16 Boileau was not alone. Marc Fumaroli has argued that Longinus's treatise provided an incentive for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century orators and writers in the vernacular to aim for greater simplicity, to turn to the humble style of rhetoric to attain the greatest of effects. Fumaroli, 'Rhétorique d'école et rhétorique adulte'. While Fumaroli is right to note Longinus as a model for effective or 'simple' discourse, he is wrong to see the simplicity of means as the essence of Longinus's treatise itself.

17 Nicolas Boileau, 'Traité du sublime, ou du merveilleux dans le discours, Traduit du grec de Longin', in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. François Escal (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 338.

18 Jules Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* (Geneva: Droz, 1958), 142.



oppositions that affected artists in France during the second half of the seventeenth century. While Boileau, Racine and La Fontaine certainly participated in and supported an elite culture, they sought to define a certain autonomy for the artist vis-à-vis the king, if with veiled and velvet words. In a two-hundred-page introductory essay to a collection of source texts from the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, he reads the *Querelle* as an institutional battle between the Republic of Letters (which drew upon the authority of the past for new artistic production and for a degree of political autonomy) and various collusions of Church and State (which appealed to a new rational principle for the organization of society and tended to support the definition of new modern rules to replace old artistic models).<sup>19</sup> If men of letters sought to tame and to regulate their literary and philosophical subject matters, their efforts were by no means simple endorsements of ministerial attempts to do the same to their human subjects.

Boileau himself was partly at fault for the eventual hollowing of the classicist aesthetic. First, he separated the legislative and the anti-legislative parts of his poetics into two different texts – the *Art poétique* and the *Traité du sublime* – both, significantly, published in 1674, though they had circulated in manuscript for several years before.<sup>20</sup> Although the two texts were linked into a single poetic programme, his champions and his detractors often read the first and ignored the second. As Nicholas Cronk has noted, Boileau’s strongest critics (Charles Perrault and Bernard le Bouvier Fontenelle) effectively subjected the category of the sublime to a strategic silence.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they misread the first. Although the *Art poétique* had sensible comments on work method and troubled ones on the artist’s autonomy vis-à-vis his public and his patron, it was above all a theory of genre. It catalogued the specific effects proper to each genre and discussed the genre conventions that allowed a poet to achieve them. In general a minimalist when it came to prescriptions, Boileau looked down on overly regulative genres (among the ancient *formes fixes*, only the sonnet merited inclusion) and only approached rigid normativity in theatrical genres.

Second, the simple statement had a philosophical importance for Boileau that made his call for simplicity lose its point once times changed. To crystallize his critique of loquacious panegyrics, Boileau advocated direct speech (rather than indirect, third-person description) and short statements (rather than periphrasis). Such simplicity, he believed, would let the ‘great’ idea (such as the biblical ‘Let there be Light’) or the ethical qualities of the speaker shine through unimpeded. The simplicity of the style contributed to the power of the effect. As important as simplicity was to Boileau, however, the technique owed its special place in his poetics to a philosophical proposition. As Cronk has shown, he drew upon a Neo-Platonic theory of poetic enthusiasm to justify poetry, for, at the time, certain theologians viewed the arbitrary signs of human language as a mask on truth. When the poet reduced the means of language to a minimum, and when the poet was properly inspired, Boileau believed, the gap between sign and signified would vanish to let truth shine unimpeded. The force of the effect was a mark that human language, ever tied to the sign, had not lost its communicative power.<sup>22</sup>

Simplicity of style was, however, by no means Boileau’s primary goal. There were two parts to Boileau’s call for simplicity, one directed towards the codified techniques by which authors and orators achieved simple styles (the means), and one directed towards the ineffable force that an artist could produce through the effective use of this style (the end). Insofar as he acted as a pedagogue and teacher, Boileau participated in the nationalistic efforts of all French men of letters to achieve a stylistic elegance that would parallel that

19 Marc Fumaroli, *Le poète et le roi: Jean de La Fontaine en son siècle* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1997); Marc Fumaroli, ‘Les abeilles et les araignées’, in *La querelle des Anciens et des Modernes: XVIIe.–XVIIIe. siècles*, ed. Anne-Marie Lecoq (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 7–218. See also Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: l’invention de l’honnête homme (1580–1750)*, Perspectives littéraires (Paris: PUF, 1996), 176–177; Daniel Gordon, ‘“Public Opinion” and the Civilizing Process in France: The Example of Morellet’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22/3 (1989), 302–328; Roger Zuber, with the participation of Micheline Cuénil, *Le classicisme*, Littérature française 4 (Paris: Arthaud, 1984), 262–284.

20 The interrelationship between the two treatises has been discussed by Carsten Zelle, *Die doppelte Ästhetik der Moderne: Revisionen des Schönen von Boileau bis Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Fumaroli, ‘Abeilles’, 153–163.

21 Cronk, *Classical Sublime*, 143–150.

22 Cronk, *Classical Sublime*, 174.



of Classical Latin, and that would contrast sharply with ornate Marinist poetry in Italy and its operatic imitations. Insofar as he acted as a critic, on the other hand, he fought for works that were simple in their effect, that is, that had the power to transport their listeners. As important as the first was to him, it was the second that impassioned him the most. Thus, in his *Art poétique* (1674), he also warned against the neglect of diversity of 'tone' and against the resultant oversimplification of style:

Voulez-vous du public mériter les amours;  
 Sans cesse en écrivant variez vos discours:  
 Un style trop égal et toujours uniforme  
 En vain brille à nos yeux, il faut qu'il nous endorme.  
 On lit peu ces auteurs, nés pour nous ennuyer,  
 Qui toujours sur un ton semblent psalmodier.<sup>23</sup>

If you wish to merit the love of your public, unceasingly vary your style in your discourses: a style too equal and uniform shines in vain in our eyes. It puts us to sleep. People seldom read those authors, born to bore us, who always seem to catechize in a single tone.

Simplicity of means had to be measured against that of the effect.

Boileau's failure to distinguish adequately between means and ends had two consequences. It allowed his immediate detractors to use his own critical principles against him, and it led to the transformation of his classicist doctrine as it was transmitted to Germany. While both French readers and German transmitters of the classicist aesthetic used the principle of simplicity to oppose rhetorical prolixity, as had Boileau, they also tended to favour the codification of technique, often at the expense of Boileau's powerful effects. The increasing regulation of technique can be seen in a literary context in the celebrated critique of Boileau by Charles Perrault, Boileau's most dedicated antagonist in the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. In the Introduction to the *Apologie des femmes* (1694), his misogynistic response to Boileau's misogynistic *Satire X* (1694), Perrault honed in on the celebrated critic's ostensible sins against, of all things, simplicity and clarity.<sup>24</sup> For instance, he took exception to transpositions of verbs and their objects, though such transpositions are standard techniques in any poetry based on rhyme. And he lambasted Boileau repeatedly for obscure images, as in this response to Boileau's homage to Madame de Maintenon:

On a de la peine à deviner ce que veulent dire ces deux Vers:

*Mais pour quelques vertus si pures, si sinceres,  
 Combien y trouve-t-on d'impudentes faussaires.*

Par faussaires on ne peut entendre que ceux qui contrefont, ou des Actes ou des signatures. On n'a jamais ouï parler que les femmes se mêlassent d'un tel mestier. Elles ont bien de la peine à former une vraie écriture, comment auroient-elles asses d'habilité pour en faire de fausse? On entrevoit que par faussaires il veut dire des hypocrites, mais cela ne s'entend que parce qu'on veut bien l'entendre.<sup>25</sup>

One is at pains to guess what these two verses mean:

But for a few virtues so pure and sincere,  
 How many impudent counterfeiters does one find.

23 Boileau, *Oeuvres complètes*, 158 (*chant I*, lines 69–74).

24 He saved his condescending encomium to feminine virtue for the main text to his poem. Charles Perrault agreed with Boileau that many women did not meet the ideals of virtue of the epoch. But where Boileau accused most women of weakness and dignified only a chosen few with self-possession, Perrault placed the virtues and the faults of women entirely in the hands of their husbands. If women strayed from the path of virtue, then it was because their husbands failed in their role as educators or were too harsh in their discipline.

25 Charles Perrault, *L'apologie des femmes* (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard, veuve et fils, 1694)[, 18].





By counterfeiters one can only mean those who counterfeit either documents or signatures. One has never heard of women mixing themselves in such a profession. They have difficulties achieving good handwriting, so how could they have enough capacity to achieve a false one? One sees that by 'counterfeiters' he means 'hypocrites', but one only understands that because one wishes to.

In this case, the image behind Boileau's metaphor is as clear as the presuppositions to Perrault's syllogism are repellent. Too hasty in his desire to chalk up polemical points, Perrault focused too much on the means of discourse: the strict logical clarity of an image and the grammatical correctness of word positions.<sup>26</sup> Of course, Boileau himself had criticized poets for their extravagant imagery and for their sins against the principles of grammar. But when Perrault took up the same themes, he did not measure them against the effects. Perrault was not alone in his turn towards rule-oriented criticism. Perrault and Fontenelle, 'geometricians' among literary critics who aligned themselves with the scientific modernity represented by Descartes, attempted to define hard rules of literature that might bear comparison to the hard rules of the mathematical and physical sciences. Such rules would reflect the perfection of modern literature and should brook no exceptions. As far as scientific laws and the codification of literary norms went, literature aspired to the condition of mathematics.<sup>27</sup>

This new spirit made its way into German criticism and eventually affected both the practice and the reception of complex polyphonic styles, such as that of Bach. Although Johann Adolph Scheibe frequently appealed to the language of sublimity in his *Critischer Musikus*, he took part in this pendular swing towards rule-based criticism and away from the cultivation of striking effects. Here it is necessary to note the transformation of French literary classicism as it made its way into German music criticism. Scheibe's debt to the Leipzig critic Johann Christoph Gottsched has often been noted, as has Gottsched's vital role in the transmission of French classicism to Germany. In a manner that at first glance resembles the way that Boileau had worked to reform French letters, Gottsched took the principles of simplicity and clarity and used them to advocate the reform of German prose style (to the misfortune of baroque poet Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's critical reception) and German theatrical traditions (exit the burlesque *Hanswurst*). Scheibe, in turn, applied the attack on rhetorical exuberance to Bach.

What is less often noted, at least in musicological literature, is that Gottsched and, in turn, Scheibe focused on the legislative aspect of classicist doctrine at the expense of its aesthetic point, the matching of means to striking effects.<sup>28</sup> Gottsched read French art and criticism both eclectically and selectively, using anodyne forms of it to tame what he saw as the rhetorical prolixity of German literary style. While he presented himself as a friend of ancient literature, if with caveats, he insisted on clarity and regularity in a manner much indebted to Charles Perrault and other Moderns in the *Querelle*.<sup>29</sup> He agreed, for instance,

26 Perrault engaged in a similar species of criticism in his treatment of ancient authors. Brody, *Boileau and Longinus*, 113–115.

27 On the 'geometricians' among literary critics see René Pomeau and Ehrard Jean, *De Fénelon à Voltaire*, new revised edition, *Histoire de la littérature française* 5 (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

28 Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen has argued that Gottsched's true importance in the musical sphere lay not in his influence on Scheibe, but rather in the impetus his poetics provided to music theorists to codify their own means. In other words, theorists emulated his regulatory impulse. Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, 'Gottsched, Johann Christoph', in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, ed. Ludwig Finscher, second edition (Kassel and Stuttgart: Bärenreiter/Metzler, 1994–2005 [2002]), Personenteil 7, columns 1405–1406.

29 The transmission of French classicism to Germany is complex, for neither Gottsched nor his Swiss opponents, Breitinger and Bodmer, took positions that accorded exactly with those of the French camps. While they agreed in their acceptance of both ancient and modern literature, they differed most in their poetic principles. Thus, as Kapitzka has documented, Gottsched and the Swiss critics traded the epithet 'Perraultianer' between them, each hoping to brand the other as a senseless critic. Peter K. Kapitzka, *Ein bürgerlicher Krieg in der gelehrten Welt: Zur Geschichte der Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes in Deutschland* (Munich: Fink, 1981), 186–188, 194. For an extended discussion of Gottsched's relationship to French literary debates see Thomas Pago, *Johann Christoph Gottsched und die Rezeption der 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes' in Deutschland* (Munich: Meidenbauer, 2003).



with Houdar de la Motte that Homer had committed unpardonable crimes not only against moral decorum, but also against literary principles.

Seit dem die Gelehrten unter uns Christen den Heydnischen Aberglauben fahren lassen, und also den Homerus mit unpartheyischen Augen angesehen, haben sie befunden: daß Zoilus vollkommen Recht gehabt, wenn er diesen großen Poeten vieler Fehler beschuldiget. Wer unter den neuern nur des Herrn de la Motte Discurs über Homerum gelesen hat, der vor seiner übersetzten Ilias steht; wird mir vollkommen Recht geben.<sup>30</sup>

Since the learned among us Christians have sent pagan superstition on its ways and have thus looked at Homer with unprejudiced eyes, we have found that Zoilus was perfectly right when he accused this great poet of many errors. He who has read, among the recent writings, M. de la Motte's discourse on Homer, which prefaces his translation of the Iliad, will agree with me entirely.

Unlike Longinus, Gottsched did not proceed to argue that Homer's force of language justified the poet's 'errors'. Rather, he suggested that poetic force could be reduced to rules.

Indeed, Gottsched had little patience with the category of sublimity, which he by and large ceded to his literary opponents in Zurich, Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger. Carsten Zelle has catalogued Gottsched's many attenuations of sublimity: (1) he demanded that 'the marvellous' (*das Wunderbare*) remain in the realm of probability, (2) he asked that tragic heroes take the moderated stances of the 'middle' character, (3) he had little patience for the physical-theological poetry of Heinrich Brockes and Albrecht von Haller, and thus excluded the sublimity of nature from his poetics, and (4) he reduced the sublime style to a 'reasonable-sublime expression' (*vernünftig-erhabener Ausdruck*).<sup>31</sup>

Gottsched's mistrust of powerful effects left its mark on Scheibe's early journalism, as did his emphasis on the regulative side of classical doctrine.<sup>32</sup> In the warning against bombast and turgidity that prefaced his explanation of the three stylistic levels, Scheibe almost paraphrased Boileau, but differed from the French critic on crucial points.

Man hat in der Musik insgemein einen falschen Begriff von der hohen Schreibart. Man nennet nur dasjenige hoch, was außerordentlich künstlich und durch einander geflochten ist, oder was überhaupt ein wunderliches, unvernünftliches, oder schwärmendes Geräusche verursacht, dessen Absicht nur mit schwerer Mühe zu errathen ist. Wenn wir aber das Natürliche und Deutliche, als das eigentliche Kennzeichen einer guten Schreibart, sehen, so werden wir dadurch auf eine ganz andere Höhe gebracht, indem jene vielmehr hochtrabend, schwülstig oder gezwungen, und also unnatürlich und undeutlich ist.<sup>33</sup>

In music one generally has a wrong idea of the high style. One only calls something high if it is extremely artificial and densely woven, or if it causes a bewildering, incomprehensible or bombastic sound. The goal of such music is difficult to guess at. It is pompous, turgid and forced, and thus unnatural and unclear. When we see naturalness and clarity as the real signs of good style, then we are taken to quite different heights.

30 Cited in Kapitza, *Ein bürgerlicher Krieg in der gelehrten Welt*, 136. On the importance of Homer for early eighteenth-century debates on the limits of canons of rules see Fumaroli, 'Abeilles', 196–218.

31 Zelle, 'Angenehmes Grauen', 273; Zelle, *Die doppelte Ästhetik der Moderne*, 134.

32 Gottsched's (and Wolff's) influence on Scheibe has been studied most thoroughly by Joachim Birke, who, however, concentrates on the philosophical-psychological passages that Scheibe added in the 1745 edition of the *Critischer Musikus*. Joachim Birke, *Christian Wolffs Metaphysik und die zeitgenössische Literatur- und Musiktheorie: Gottsched, Scheibe, Mizler* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1966), 49–66.

33 Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 126.



Although Boileau and Scheibe both attacked the rhetorical high style, they cannot be seen as having been engaged in the same project.

In part the differences were ones of historical context. Boileau wrote at a time in which there was a well developed repertory of striking literary works that adhered to his technical prescriptions on simplicity. Although Scheibe could and did point to Reinhard Keiser, Johann Adolf Hasse, Carl Heinrich Graun and Georg Philipp Telemann, in 1737 the number of works both simple in their means and of a calibre to match Corneille, Racine and La Fontaine was still small by comparison. Moreover, Scheibe's patriotic animosity towards Italian music did not parallel Boileau's dislike of Italian Marinist literature. Composers of Italian opera had changed their style since the dichotomies of French and Italian style had first developed, and in many ways their works now fitted Scheibe's principles of naturalness and clarity quite well. Part of the difference between Boileau and Scheibe, then, lies in how they each responded to their historical situation. Scheibe's diatribes, whether against the sensuality of Italian opera or the complexity of German counterpoint, have the forced quality of a mode of thought rigidly applied.

The other part of the difference is in the substance of the claims, in the creative principles and aesthetic ideals that underpinned their call for simplicity. If Scheibe and Boileau shared a distaste for bombast, they differed on how this bombast was to be measured. When Boileau criticized the complexity of the rhetorical high style, he used the supreme power of the effect as the crucial and deciding point: the sublime is not the sublime style, but rather 'that extraordinary and marvellous quality in language that strikes and that ensures that a work elevates, ravishes, and transports' (*cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enleve, ravit, transporte*). From this ideal he then derived his technical prescriptions.

Scheibe, by contrast, emphasized quite different characteristics: 'naturalness and clarity' (*das Natürliche und Deutliche*). The gap between Boileau's extraordinary and marvellous, on one hand, and Scheibe's naturalness and clarity, on the other, is in part merely a difference in the intensity of the effect: like many early eighteenth-century critics, Scheibe participated in the shift in taste that privileged the finer nuances and subtleties of delicate sensibility.<sup>34</sup> However, such subtle affective registers do not in themselves exclude talk of sublimity. In the literary sphere, Jean de La Fontaine offered brilliant examples of subtle yet striking effects.<sup>35</sup>

More importantly, in a move beyond subtle effects, Scheibe used his call for clarity to strengthen his attempt to codify style and regulate artistic production. Supported by the principle of clarity, he postulated technical norms, such as unity of style and a prominent single melody, and used them as pillars of a normative pedagogy and criticism, even to the point that he ignored the particular effects achieved by two of his most famous contemporaries, Georg Philipp Telemann and Johann Sebastian Bach. Scheibe shared with Telemann a taste for moderate, agreeable emotional states, but Telemann shared with Bach scepticism towards the attempted codification of compositional procedures.

In the case of Telemann, Scheibe's error was not in his judgment of the composer, for whom he had nothing but praise, but rather in how he substantiated his judgments in his discussions of style. Scheibe based his criticism on a system that coordinated two concepts of style: one, which he borrowed from rhetoric, related to registral level (elevated, middle and humble, each with its own characteristic misuse: turgid, indistinct and base) and one related to national traits (Italian, French, German and Polish). These two concepts were paramount (though genre and what might be called 'temperament' also entered into his journal articles), and they interacted with each other in various ways in his discussions, at times productively, at times problematically.<sup>36</sup>

34 On the shift towards moderate emotional states see Georgia J. Cowart, 'Sense and Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Musical Thought', *Acta Musicologica* 56/2 (1984), 255–256.

35 See Fumaroli, *Le poète et le roi*, 336–343.

36 Thus, for instance, at times the French style functions as a reasonable middle between the ornate German style and the popular Italian style; at times it is the true elevated style that avoids the ostensible turgidity and bombast of the German and Italian styles.



Among the primary criteria of good composition was stylistic purity, while stylistic mixture constituted a form of degeneracy. In a comment on French overtures of 17 September 1737, for instance, Scheibe noted that 'Today, many [French] composers begin to fall away from their general [national] style of music; they mix it strongly with the Italian. However, it also in general loses all agreeableness (*Annehmlichkeit*).'<sup>37</sup> However, as Karen Trinkle has noted, if this was his complaint, Scheibe was entirely wrong to praise Telemann. In the concert overtures in Telemann's *Tafelmusik*, for instance, slow introductions in the French style give way to fast sections with clear debts to Vivaldi.<sup>38</sup> Scheibe was not necessarily wrong to defend the principle of stylistic purity. After all, the principle has a clear function in systems of rhetoric. Stylistic decorum – the appropriate matching of style to idea – presupposes that each style aims at a certain effect, that orators who match style to their ideas present their message most efficaciously and that the mixture of styles diminishes the power of the effect. Bold ideas call for bold words and a bold tone. Thus, in paragraphs that clearly took opera as their point of departure, Scheibe offered sensible remarks on stylistic decorum.<sup>39</sup>

When Scheibe applied the principle of stylistic purity to concert overtures, however, he stumbled over essential differences between language and music and lost sight of the point of stylistic decorum. First, there is no scripted concept or idea in instrumental music that necessarily demands a certain style for its proper expression. Second, music allows mixture of styles more easily than language, where a characteristic repertory of concepts and subject matters grounds each style.<sup>40</sup> It is true that stylistic purity in instrumental genres often enabled works to meet their functional requirements. The ceremonial pacing of the slow introduction, coupled with the vivacity of an allegro with imitative entries, made the overture a fitting start to an opera. However, the functionalization of style would not necessarily exclude the mixture of national styles that Scheibe abhorred. Telemann could combine the 'elevated' elements of both French and Italian styles – the grandeur of dotted rhythms and the fire of virtuoso passagework and bariolage – to create works with their own unity of affect. Third, concert overtures were not linked to operas and, insofar as their primary goal was to delight the public, they did not require stylistic purity. Stylistic purity, in other words, could have a particular role in vocal music and functional music, but lost much of its *raison d'être* in instrumental genres devoted to table music. In sum, Scheibe used an ideal of simplicity and clarity to support his codification of style, and he treated his styles with a firm respect for their normative character. But he neglected to measure his prescriptions and proscriptions against the effects that could be achieved.

Scheibe's misplaced case for Telemann throws light on his case against Bach and, in turn, against complex contrapuntal styles and genres in general. Scholars have often and rightly explained his criticism against Bach as motivated by some combination of personal grudge, sociological allegiance and difference of aesthetic goal.<sup>41</sup> However, his censures have other grounds as well. Scheibe developed his critique from a

37 'Heute zu Tage fangen zwar viele an, von ihrer allgemeinen Musikart abzugehen; sie vermischen sie sehr stark mit der italienischen. Allein, sie verlieret auch insgemein alle Annehmlichkeit.' Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 147.

38 Karen Trinkle, 'Telemann und Scheibe: Unterschiedliche Vorstellungen von der Konzertovertüre', trans. Brian Lutz, in *Die Entwicklung der Ouvertüren-Suite im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert: Bedeutende Interpreten des 18. Jahrhunderts und ihre Ausstrahlung auf Komponisten, Kompositionsschulen und Instrumentenbau* (Michaelstein: Institut für Aufführungspraxis, 1996), 31–37.

39 Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 126–131. The principle shuns the possibilities of both irony and musical commentary on reported action.

40 I adapt a point that Brian Vickers has made to criticize the application of the term 'figures' to music. Because figures include a play on concept and not just on the formal presentation of the concept, he has said, musicians can appropriately speak of figures only (1) insofar as they occur in vocal music or (2) insofar as they approach the relatively small set of rhetorical figures that do not deal with semantics. In the same way, the principle of stylistic decorum loses some of its point once applied to instrumental music. Brian Vickers, 'Figures of Rhetoric/Figures of Music?', *Rhetorica* 2/1 (1984), 33.

41 See especially George Buelow, 'In Defence of J. A. Scheibe against J. S. Bach', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 101 (1974–1975), 85–100; Günther Wagner, 'J. A. Scheibe – J. S. Bach: Versuch einer Bewertung', *Bach-Jahrbuch* (1982), 33–49; Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), chapter 8.



critical principle – that the pleasure of music and its accordance with agreeableness (*Annehmlichkeit*) depended on the clear presentation of a melody – and did not trust his ears to indicate that his critical principles, as sensible as they might be in the abstract, might brook exceptions. He focused on the technical means that Bach deployed, in particular equal polyphony, and lost sight of the powerful effects that Bach, more than many of his predecessors and contemporaries, could achieve with this diversity.

Scheibe's crucial error was his assumption that certain technical procedures and certain styles were necessarily turgid. In his article devoted to style, he elaborated on his ideals of clarity and naturalness by naming specific faults that produced a lack of clarity:

In die schwülstige Schreibart fällt man insgemein, wenn man allen Stimmen gleich viel zu thun giebt; wenn sie sich alle beständig mit einander herum zanken, daß man weder die Worte, den Gesang, noch auch die harmonischen Verbindungen von einander entscheiden kann. Eine allzu-große Kunst führet uns allemal von dem Natürlichen und Deutlichen aufs Dunkele. Wie ist es also möglich, daß eine Schreibart, da mehr die Kunst, als die Natur, herrschet, schön und ordentlich, ja erhaben seyn kann?<sup>42</sup>

Generally one falls into the turgid style when one gives all voices equally much to do, that is, when they all constantly quarrel with each other, so that one cannot differentiate the words, the melody or even the harmonic connections from each other. Too great an art leads us always from the natural and the clear to the dark. How is it possible that a style in which more art than nature reigns can be beautiful, ordered and, yes, sublime?

It was his mistrust of great artifice that also underpinned his judgment of Bach in the late spring of the same year. The problem concerned equal polyphony, above all. While Scheibe was correct to note that equal polyphony could obscure the words (a time-honoured criticism), the melody (*der Gesang*) and harmonic connections (*die harmonischen Verbindungen*), and even that it could deter many listeners, he was wrong to argue that the high artifice involved in the style necessarily detracted from the sublimity of the effect, that the absence of a clear melody implied the absence of a powerful effect. Bach's own music offered him a valid rejoinder.

The issue requires much couching, for the debate is famously complex. Scheibe targeted Bach's vocal music above all, for he believed in the primacy of the word, and his criticism of Bach needs to be balanced against his constant advocacy of a variety of sophisticated musical techniques, among them good part-writing, independent inner voices and the motivic development of the bass – all characteristics of the music of Telemann and later C. P. E. Bach.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Scheibe correctly labelled Bach's attitude as that of the professional musician (pejoratively termed a *Musikant*) devoted to the professional's art of harmony, not as that of an artist engaged in an art tied, thanks to its text and its significance, to an incipient community of fine arts (the *Musikus*).<sup>44</sup>

Yet it would be a mistake to reduce Scheibe's judgment wholly to personal, stylistic or sociological differences. As he did in his judgment of Telemann's concert overtures, and indeed as did many critics until the 1770s, Scheibe put too much faith in critical yardsticks.<sup>45</sup> If rule-oriented criticism was only one of the many factors that drove Scheibe towards his famous judgment of Bach, it was not negligible. As Scheibe himself wrote, 'In general people concern themselves the least about the cause when a piece of music lacks an

42 Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 132.

43 See Wagner, 'J. A. Scheibe – J. S. Bach', 38 and 44–45.

44 Dahlhaus has rightly characterized Scheibe as an example of the eighteenth-century *Bildungsmusiker*, a type opposed to the professional craftsman. Carl Dahlhaus, 'Der Dilettant und der Banause in der Musikgeschichte', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 25/3 (1968), 170.

45 On the centrality of error detection to music criticism in the 1760s see Mary Sue Morrow, *German Music Criticism in the Late Eighteenth Century: Aesthetic Issues in Instrumental Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chapter 5.



emphatic character. People judge much too much with their ears.<sup>46</sup> Scheibe championed the judgment of reason without regard for the empirical judgment of sensuous experience. He sought to legislate the means of composition but ignored the ultimate proof and end: the striking, sublime effect.

To summarize, it is possible to compare Longinus, Boileau and Scheibe according to the operative categories of their poetics. Each of the writers enumerated certain means by which powerful effects could be produced. Such lists are of course essential to pedagogy and to artistic production. They help to set general procedures of style, and they help artists match their works to the taste of an epoch and an audience. Longinus wrote about the figures and diction of the elevated style, Boileau about the simple statements that allow grand or noble ideas to strike with particular force, Scheibe about clear and comprehensible phrases and stylistic decorum. Each writer also matched his technical prescriptions to a certain type of effect. For Longinus and Boileau, this was 'transport'. For Scheibe, this was 'clarity' and 'naturalness'. Finally, Boileau and Scheibe both subscribed to a classicist aesthetic that gave a high importance to simplicity. However, Boileau and Scheibe differed in how they applied this principle. Boileau used it to regulate style, but he insisted upon the priority of transport. Scheibe, by contrast, used it above all to regulate style. As a result, the classicist aesthetic took new contours in the pen of Scheibe.

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46 'Man bekümmert sich insgemein am wenigsten um die Ursache, wenn einer Musik der Nachdruck mangelt. Man urtheilet allzuviel nach dem Gehöre.' Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 88.

