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Performing Passions: Enacting a rhetorical technique

In eighteenth-century Germany, passions were, in music and elsewhere, considered rational, and as separable and knowable physical inner entities. A concert was a collective experience with various performative layers where the passions were shared in the room. Influential practitioners and theoreticians considered the purpose of music to be to move the listeners, and requested instrumentalists to transport themselves into the passions of the music in order to arouse the same passions in their audiences. This rhetorical technique had been known since antiquity and was recommended also to other artists and to orators.

We have studied the aesthetic and affective implications of this technique, and explored how it can be re-enacted in performing two German mid-eighteenth-century sonatas on period instruments. Initially, we independently analysed the passions written into the music, and then we aroused these passions in ourselves while playing. The results included an experience of a stronger presence of the specific passions of the music both in the sounding music and in our own bodies. The passion analyses increased our awareness of the affective content and potential of the music.

In the performing network, which includes our own bodies, musical instruments, musical scores, the listeners and the room, this technique and the aesthetic of the time places the focus on the relations between the actants, rather than on an expressive subject or a performed object. We argue that a passion analysis of this type of music amplifies our understanding of it, just as a formal analysis or harmonic analysis does, and that it can be a valuable tool for performers and in higher music education. The recommendations to arouse passions in oneself while performing and composing underlines the performative, subjective and corporeal element of musical rhetoric in this period in addition to semantic or formal elements.