

Summary of presentation “To play with passion: A rhetorical strategy in musical performance”

We presented preliminary results from the ongoing project “Rhetorical and Romantic affective strategies in musical performance”, funded by the Swedish Research Council. The purpose of the project is to reach a deeper understanding of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music’s affective potential and to enhance the possibilities of affective participation for both performers and listeners in today’s performing situations. The project includes a re-enactment of the affective strategy recommended to musical performers by German mid-eighteenth-century musicians and theoreticians. According to this strategy, the performers evoke specific, constantly alternating affections in themselves in order to move listeners into the same affections. The sentimental culture of the eighteenth century included the view that music’s aim was to move the listeners. A concert had various performative layers and was a collective experience. To publicly express passions, often through shedding tears was considered virtuous and a sign of sensibility. The listeners’ affections were simultaneously awoken and reinforced by: 1. the affections embodied in the sounding music, 2. the (same) affections that were actively aroused in the performers’ bodies, and 3. the (same) affections that were evoked and expressed in the bodies of their fellow listeners.

In designing and preparing for the re-enactment, we used both eighteenth-century sources and results from recent theoretical and empirical research in music and emotions from psychology and philosophy. Eighteenth-century theoreticians recognized music’s ability to depict passionate utterances. This aligns with today’s resemblance theories, according to which music can resemble human expressive behavior that characterize particular emotions. Today’s discussion in philosophy and psychology includes the idea that one way music can evoke emotions in listeners is through emotional contagion from music to listener.

The presentation included a summary of the theoretical foundations of the re-enactment and its methodology. A key part of the presentation was playing German mid-18th-century music for flute and harpsichord, using period instruments and the affective rhetorical strategy recommended to musical performers during the period. We invited the conference participants to re-enact the corresponding listening attitude.