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Derek Remeš

Musical Architecture in Three Domains: Stretto, Suspension, and Diminution in Sweelinck's Chromatic Fantasia

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck's Chromatic Fantasia is among the most famous keyboard works of the sixteenth century.¹ It served as a model for instrumental polyphony that was imitated throughout Europe in the seventeenth century.² The fantasia's subject is treated in augmentation and diminution at four rhythmic levels, a parallel to the four levels of suspensions used throughout the piece. In addition, the subject appears twice in four-voice stretto. This repeated stretto passage acts as a structural "pillar," which articulates the piece into three large sections. The large-scale architecture is ultimately the result of simultaneous intensification in the three domains of stretto, suspension, and diminution.

The fantasia divides into exposition, middle section, and climax, as shown in table 1. The two outer "pillars" in gray articulate the two largest divisions of the piece, with analogous inner pillars subdividing the middle section. The subject is treated in four levels of augmentation and diminution – eighth, quarter, half, and whole notes, illustrated in example 1. (The original manuscript is in 2/1 time, or two whole notes to a bar. Like Harold Vogel and Pieter Dirksen's edition of Sweelinck's keyboard works, my examples maintain the original barring and note values, but number each measure as if it were two bars of 2/2 time.³ Thus, the first measure is labeled "one," the next is labeled "three," and so on.

¹ Harold Vogel, "Sweelinck's 'Orfeo' Die 'Fantasia Crommatica,'" *Musik in die Kirche*, No. 2 (2005)

² The *Ricercare Prima of Annuale*, Op. 8 by Giovanni Battista Fasolo (1600-1659) paraphrases the first thirty-four bars of Sweelinck's Chromatic Fantasia (and is only fifty-nine bars total) and was intended for pedagogical purposes.

³ Harald Vogel and Pieter Dirksen, ed., *Sämtliche Werke für Tasteninstrumente Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, c2005-), Bd. 1

Contrapuntal lines not relevant to the present discussion are omitted.) Example 2 shows the four analogous metrical levels of suspensions. The term "consonant fourth" refers to the technique of using a dissonant fourth as the preparation for a suspension. Example 3 shows the two passages of four-voice subject stretto – the so-called structural "pillars," in gray in table 1. Stretti are analyzed using the generic time interval of a "beat" to facilitate comparison between metrical levels, since example 3a and 3b are the same passage in diminution. The accented dissonances, shown in boxes in both examples, are the result of rearticulated suspensions. In example 3a, the suspension occurs at the whole note level in the alto voice of m.59 (the dotted ties in both examples are my own). This passage supplies the fourth level of suspension in example 2d, and is the only instance of a whole note suspension in the entire piece. Thus, example 3a combines the two domains of stretto and suspension at their fourth and most heightened level: four-voice stretto saturates the texture with the maximum amount of thematic material, and the whole note suspension is the single longest dissonant pitch used in the piece. Example 3a is repeated in diminution as example 3b in the final climax of the piece. This is the only repeated passage in the whole fantasia, which is evidence of its importance as a structural pillar.

The exposition, shown in table 2, explores various contrapuntal combinations between the subject and two countersubjects (CS1 and CS2) in invertible counterpoint. Taken together, these three melodic lines form what Peter Schubert and Massimiliano Guido call a contrapuntal "box," shown in example 4.⁴ The pillar in gray in table 2, corresponding to example 3a, stands out because of its calm homorhythmic half note texture after a flourish of thirty-second notes. There are four levels of rhythm separating thirty-second notes from half notes, analogous to the four levels of intensity in each domain. The stark contrast

⁴ Massimiliano Guido and Peter Schubert. "Unpacking the Box in Frescobaldi's Ricercari of 1615." *Music Theory Online* 20.2 (2014).

between the thirty-second notes and half notes creates tension between the expectation that the thirty-seconds will return, and the uncertainty of when. Like a coiled spring, this tension provides the impetus for the remainder of the piece to compose out the subject in four metrical levels of augmentation and diminution. In this way, the pillar in example 3a is a summation of the processes that drive the large-scale architecture; that is, stretto, suspension, and diminution, each active in four levels of intensity. Example 3a also acts like a bookend, dividing the exposition from the new material in the middle section.

Table 3 illustrates how the middle section immediately introduces a new countersubject in mm.70-74, termed CS3. Countersubjects one and two from the exposition's contrapuntal box are never reused, while a new box is formed between subject, countersubject three, and countersubject four, first used in mm.74-78 and repeated in mm.78-82, shown as example 2c, and again in mm.87-92. The middle section is subdivided into three parts by the introduction of the subject in augmentation and later in diminution. This section also explores the domain of stretto, first introduced by the pillar in the exposition. However, the middle section focuses almost exclusively on countersubject stretto. On two occasions does its complexity rival that of the subject stretto in the twin pillars by having the same countersubject present in four simultaneous voices – that is, it reaches the fourth and highest level of stretto intensification. These two passages are shown in gray in table 3, and are illustrated in examples 4 and 5. Note that the use of stretto is not strict when all four voices are sounding. This pair of countersubject stretti mirrors the two outer pillars which contain them. Like the outer pillars, these internal pillars are located near the borders between subsections. Consequently, in the middle section, the domain of stretto is used to signal the arrival of a new level in the domain of augmentation and diminution. Thus, the emerging pattern is that heightening in one domain acts as harbinger of a new level of intensity in another domain.

An overview of the last section, or climax, is given in table 4. At the end of the middle section, the surface rhythm accelerates to a stream of constant sixteenths and sixteenth triplets for over thirty bars, finally arriving on a "dominant" pedal point after a "Phrygian half cadence" (both anachronistic terms) in m.171. This abrupt change in texture articulates the start of the climax, and begins an extended passage of various subject strettos, culminating with the repetition of the initial four-voice pillar in diminution, shown in gray in table 4, and corresponding to example 3b. The first pillar served to close the exposition and combined the domains of stretto and suspension; the second pillar heightens those domains by applying diminution. The second pillar in the climax also leads to the entry of the fourth and most heightened level of subject diminution in eighth notes in m.184. Like the internal pillars in the middle section, the second outer pillar signals the arrival of a new level of intensity in a different domain. This double subject diminution, shown in example 6a, also contains unusual accented dissonances, indicated by vertical arrows. Example 6b offers a rationale: if the bass pedal point is disregarded, the upper voices form parallel imperfect consonances. Still, the insistent repetition of dissonant sevenths with the bass accentuates the climactic arrival of the fourth and most heightened level of subject diminution. Thus, the climax reaches maximum intensification in the domains of stretto and diminution; the whole note suspension – the highest level in that domain – already occurred in the initial pillar, and returned in heightened diminution in the climax.

In sum, the two largest formal articulations in the piece are the result of simultaneous intensification in the domains of stretto, suspension, and diminution. The fantasia's large-scale architecture is therefore shaped by, and contained within, with twin pillars.