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Abstract:

Hearing Emotion, Feeling Key: Timbre, Technique, and Tonality in J.S. Bach's Flute Obbligati

J.S. Bach's choices of key in his obbligato flute parts had far-reaching implications due to the instrument's idiosyncrasies. Pitches belonging to a baroque flute's natural scale play sonorously and readily, whereas those requiring "cross-fingerings" are more unstable and have a "veiled" timbre weak in overtones. On the baroque flute, different keys thus attain distinct timbral profiles, determined by the characteristics of their component pitches. Historically informed performers frequently invoke affect to explain key choices in baroque flute parts, implying key-determined timbre as the motivating factor.

Through an examination of flute obbligati in arias from Bach's passions and cantatas, I demonstrate how he correlates timbral and textual associations, using keys with unrestricted, bright tone in arias with positive affects, and keys with thin, volatile timbre for emotionally strenuous arias. Drawing on recent literature on both timbre and embodiment, I argue that strained baroque flute timbres produce an affectual response in the audience through cross-modal imagery—for instance, from associations with the human voice in emotionally heightened states—and through amodal mimetic participation that produces tensions in the body (Cox 2016). Finally, I explore how the playing technique alterations necessary to make cross-fingered notes speak cause flutists to experience thin-timbred keys rich in cross-fingerings as effortful, tense, and volatile and keys with few cross-fingerings as more free-blowing and relaxed. These differences inform the performer's experience and understanding of the music and, consequently, their musical realization, thus rendering each key's emotive associations audible in a further dimension. By examining this repertoire through era-appropriate instruments, I provide valuable insight into how Bach utilized instrument timbre and technical difficulty to expressive ends and the experience of these aspects by listeners and performers alike.