

CHARLES AVISON'S ESSAY  
ON MUSICAL EXPRESSION

PIERRE DUBOIS

An **Ashgate** Book

## CHARLES AVISON'S *ESSAY ON MUSICAL EXPRESSION*

*Charles Avison's Essay on Musical Expression*, first published in 1752, is a major contribution to the debate on musical aesthetics which developed in the course of the eighteenth century. Considered by Charles Burney as the first essay devoted to 'musical criticism' proper, it established the primary importance of 'expression' and reconsidered the relative importance of harmony and melody. Immediately after its publication it was followed by William Hayes's *Remarks* (1753), to which Avison himself retorted in his *Reply*. Taken together these three texts offer a fascinating insight into the debate that raged in the eighteenth century between the promoters of the so-called 'ancient music' (such as Hayes) and the more 'modern' musicians. Beyond matters of taste, what was at stake in Avison's theoretical contribution was the assertion that the individual's response to music ultimately mattered more than the dry rules established by professional musicians.

Avison also wrote several prefaces to the published editions of his own musical compositions. This volume reprints these prefaces and advertisements together with his *Essay* to provide an interesting view of eighteenth-century conceptions of composition and performance, and a complete survey of Avison's theory of music.

***To Jacques Carré, who shares my love of primary sources***

# Charles Avison's *Essay on Musical Expression*

With Related Writings by William Hayes  
and Charles Avison

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There are various existing copies of the works published here. I have worked at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), the British Library (London), the Bodleian Library (Oxford), and Newcastle Central Library. I am grateful to the staff of these Libraries for their kind assistance.

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## Notes on the Text

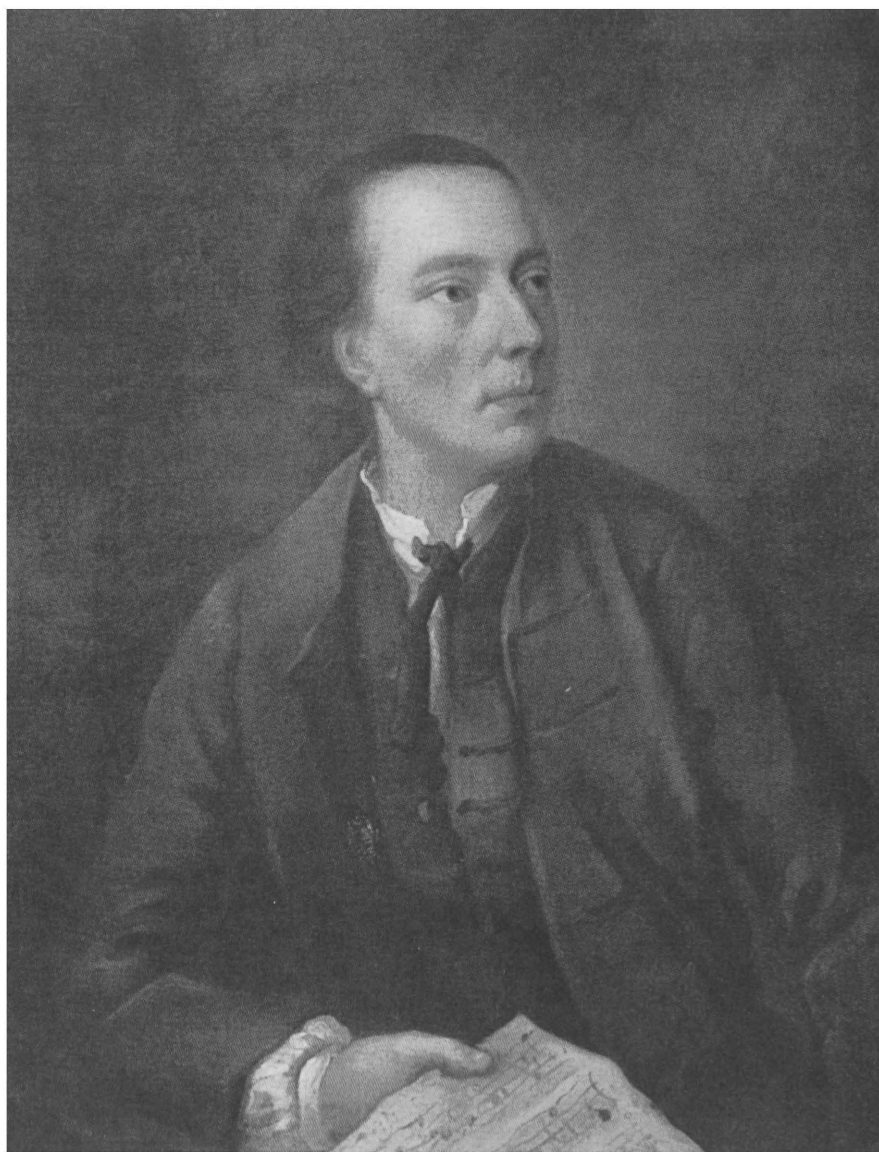
For the present edition of Charles Avison's *Essay on Musical Expression*, all three eighteenth-century editions published in 1752, 1753, and 1775 have been consulted. Because of the inclusion of William Hayes's *Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression*, it made sense to use primarily the 1753 edition, which included Avison's *Reply to the Remarks on the Essay on Musical Expression*. This explains the presence of the interesting announcement of Avison's intended edition of Marcello's *Psalms*, which was not included in the other editions of the *Essay*.

The different texts have been reproduced as faithfully to the originals as possible, respecting the vagaries of spelling, punctuation and capitalisation, and the general presentation (including dropped initials), with corrections only for what clearly appears to have been obvious misprints in the original editions. There is not always consistency in Avison's spelling: for instance, he generally spells 'harpsicord' without an 'h', but sometimes with it. We have retained the spelling used in the sources.

Avison's and Hayes's numerous foot-notes are to be found at the bottom of every page, whereas our own notes can be found at the end of each part, or chapter, of the volume.

The musical examples have been photographed from the original editions. The musical examples from Avison's *Reply to the Remarks on the Essay on Musical Expression* are reproduced courtesy of the Bodleian Library. The musical examples from Hayes's *Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression* are reproduced courtesy of the British Library. The portrait of Charles Avison is reproduced by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of St. Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.





**Portrait of Charles Avison**, attributed to Francis Lindo, c. 1760, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. By permission of the Dean and Chapter of St. Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle upon Tyne

# Introduction

In Britain as well as on the Continent, the eighteenth century was witness to the rise of a so-called 'science of aesthetics' as an autonomous field of intellectual theorising. Whereas in the past the onus of theoretical reflection had mainly been put on poetry, the Age of Enlightenment gradually included the other arts in the discourse on the beautiful. Theorist after theorist endeavoured to define and understand man's 'sense of beauty', that is, man's peculiar ability to be moved by beautiful objects, whether natural or man-made. This discussion was multifarious. In Britain, there is no doubt that Joseph Addison's celebrated *Essays* on the 'Pleasures of the Imagination', published in the *Spectator* in 1712,<sup>1</sup> proved greatly influential, especially as they introduced a new perspective concerning the importance of the perceiving *subject* in the enjoyment of a beautiful object. Whereas the classical tradition upheld by the scholastics of yore insisted on the respect of the formal rules of composition, handed down from master to pupil generation after generation, Addison based his approach on the new epistemology resulting from the discoveries of Newton and, above all, Locke.<sup>2</sup> According to the latter, man's knowledge depended on the gradual accumulation, in time, of information conveyed to the mind by the senses. There were no innate ideas, Locke asserted, and the 'blank page' of the mind had to be filled by data gathered from the outer world. Time itself thus became an essential element in the acquisition of knowledge. This implied moreover that knowledge became much more relative than before, since no two persons could have exactly the same experience and their respective knowledge was then bound to differ. This entailed a general theory of relativity and tolerance. In the *Essays* on the 'Pleasures of the Imagination', Addison thus turned his back on the prescriptive dogmatism of the past and, instead, laid the emphasis on man's personal response to the stimuli provided by the contemplation of a beautiful scene or object.

A new critical tradition stemmed from this, owing to which music was gradually to acquire more and more importance in the discussion on taste and aesthetics in the course of the eighteenth century. Music, indeed, appeared as an almost ideal testing-ground for the theories concerning man's perception, emotion and sensibility. Man's response to music was perceived to be all the more mysterious and difficult to account for as its status as an imitative art began to be questioned. Rather than being subsumed as one of the 'Sister Arts', subservient to poetry, music came to be considered as a particularly appropriate field of investigation where one could grasp man's subjective perception of the beautiful. Music and the question of taste thus became closely interlocked.

One of the most important English writers in this process was undoubtedly Charles Avison, a musician and composer who was born and lived in Newcastle upon Tyne and wrote the *Essay on Musical Expression*, as well as several 'Prefaces' and 'Advertisements' prefixed to his own compositions. Avison's

*Essay*, first published in 1752, constituted a turning-point in the discourse on musical aesthetics in Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century. By contrast, as will later be shown, William Hayes's *Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression*, first published in 1753, provides a bench-mark by which it is possible to see the novelty of Avison's perspective. This is why it was considered appropriate that Avison's critical contribution, as well as William Hayes's *Remarks*, should be published again — and together — to cast light on a key aspect of the aesthetic debate in eighteenth-century England. Significantly, a similar, though in no way identical, quarrel took place in France, between Rameau and Rousseau, at about the same time. The debate, we are therefore led to understand, was more than purely musical: it had philosophical and ideological undertones which were central to the development of thought in the eighteenth century.

### Charles Avison's Life and Musical Activity

Charles Avison was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, where he was baptised on 16 February 1709, and where he died on 10 May 1770.<sup>3</sup> He was the fifth of nine children born to Richard and Ann Avison. His father (Richard) was a member of the ancient Incorporated Company of Town Waits of Newcastle. The Town Waits, who had originally been engaged as night Watchmen, were the official town band and were licensed to teach music.<sup>4</sup> Avison's father was therefore a practising musician and the young Charles probably received his first musical education from him. He seems then to have entered the service of Ralph Jenison, a patron of the arts who was MP for Northumberland from 1724 to 1741, and to have received further education from him, as well as from Colonel John Blathwayt (or Blaithwaite), who had been a director of the Royal Academy of Music.<sup>5</sup> Both William Hayes and Charles Burney claimed that Avison studied under Geminiani in London,<sup>6</sup> and an article in *The Newcastle Journal* mentioned that he was a 'disciple' of the Italian composer.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the enthusiastic admiration for Geminiani expressed by Avison in the *Essay* and some of his 'Prefaces' can be interpreted as a token of the respect and almost filial debt of a pupil to his master. However, though it is most probable that he visited the continent, there is no evidence that he travelled to Italy or had musical tuition there.

The earliest known reference to Avison's musical activities is an announcement for a benefit concert on 20 March 1734 at Hickford's Room, London, where he offered a programme of concertos by Corelli and Geminiani, songs by Handel and various solos on the German flute, violin and harpsichord.<sup>8</sup> Then, on 13 October 1735, he was appointed organist of St. John the Baptist, Newcastle.<sup>9</sup> His appointment only took effect in June 1736 after the new organ, built by John Byfield, had been installed.<sup>10</sup> On 20 October 1735, on the death of Thomas Powell,<sup>11</sup> he also became organist at St. Nicholas (which became the cathedral in 1878) at a yearly salary of £20. The organ had originally been built by Rhenatus Harris in 1676 at a cost of £300. In 1736, it was described by Bourne, without other precision, as a 'Double-Organ'.<sup>12</sup> A trumpet stop was added on 22 June 1699.<sup>13</sup> In 1710, £200 had been spent for the overhaul of the instrument.<sup>14</sup> The

composition of the organ was quite a typical one for an English organ of the period.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, however, a Swell was added by Richard Bridges at Avison's request in 1749.<sup>16</sup> The Common Council Minutes report: 'Charles Avison having represented that a swell stop is now universal, Mr. Avison is ordered to negotiate with Mr. Bridges and oversee the putting in of the same'.<sup>17</sup> From this can be inferred not only that Avison was instrumental in introducing the 'modern taste' in the provincial city of Newcastle, but also that the question of 'expression' was not only a theoretical one, but one that Charles Avison felt deeply concerned with as a practising musician.

In October 1735, Charles Avison organised a series of subscription concerts in Newcastle, a venture that was to be repeated for many years to come.<sup>18</sup> They took place in the Assembly Room in the Groat Market. In July 1738, Avison was formally appointed musical director of the Newcastle Musical Society, a title he retained until his death, as he did his post at St. Nicholas. By 1750, the concerts were organised according to a set pattern: they usually began at 6 o'clock, and were organised from early October until late March or early April. There were twelve concerts at fortnightly intervals, and the subscription amounted to 10s. 6d. The venue was moved to Parker's Long Room in 1757, and the price of subscription was raised to 13s., and then to 15s. for fourteen concerts.<sup>19</sup> As from 1757, a summer concerts series, lasting from April to August, was added to the winter subscription. Besides, Avison also held benefit concerts, as well as an annual concert for the new Infirmary erected in 1751 'for the Relief of the sick and lame Poor in this Place and adjacent Counties'.<sup>20</sup>

Although he was offered the post of organist at York Minster in 1734 — a position eventually accepted by James Nares (1715-1783) — two posts in Dublin on Geminiani's recommendation between 1733 and 1740, a teaching post in Edinburgh, and the succession to Dr. Pepusch as organist of the Charterhouse in London in 1753,<sup>21</sup> he declined all these prestigious offers and stayed in Newcastle his whole life. Judging from the offers he was made, one can imagine that the standard of his execution, as well as the degree of esteem in which he was held, must have been rather high.

Avison played and taught the organ, the harpsichord, the flute and the violin.<sup>22</sup> A newspaper advertisement informs us that he reserved his Mondays and Fridays for teaching his private pupils:

Mr. Avison begs to acquaint his friends that Mondays and Fridays are set apart for his teaching in Newcastle and as it will be for the advantage of his scholars to be taught at his room in Rosemary lane he proposes to attend young Ladies on the harpsichord between the hours of nine and one in the forenoon; — and — from two to six in the evening — he will teach the violin and German flute:

And where all his scholars may be assured of punctual attendance and of every other assistance in his power to serve them. The terms are half a guinea per month (or eight lessons) and one guinea entrance.<sup>23</sup>

Avison's busy life seems thus to have been organised according to a set pattern. Socially, Avison also appears to have belonged to the polite society of Newcastle, mixing with literary circles and earning a comfortable income.<sup>24</sup> P.M. Horsley mentions that the bookshops of Joseph Barber and William Charnley in Newcastle were in effect literary clubs, patronised by the élite of the district, among whom were Sir Walter Blackett, Sir Francis Delaval, Lord Ravensworth, the Ridleys of Blagdon, Edward Montagu of Denton Hall, Dr. Askew, Hugh Moises (a vicar who was the master of the local Grammar School), Thomas Slack, and Aubone Surtees.<sup>25</sup>

In 1748, Charles Avison gave £100 towards the restoration of the organ of St. John's, on condition that the parish should find the balance and appoint him nominal organist, with the right to choose a deputy. This was good investment, as the salary was £20 per annum, at least part of which he could retain even if one of his pupils deputised in his own place.

Outside his activities as Director of the Newcastle Musical Society organising benefit concerts, Charles Avison collaborated with his friend, the organist and composer John Garth, in promoting subscription concerts in Durham. Provincial musical life was quite intense. The Durham concerts were held on Tuesdays, those in Newcastle on Thursdays; there were also theatre productions in Newcastle and Durham on Wednesdays, as well as concerts in a room at the vicarage of St. Nicholas on Sunday evenings as from 1761.<sup>26</sup> Avison's intense activity as a concert manager was not always plain-sailing and he was involved in a few controversies.<sup>27</sup> In 1758, he inserted an advertisement in the *Newcastle Journal* in which he vindicated his management of the concerts and the regulation of the tickets.<sup>28</sup> He underlined the public utility of public music, 'not only as it promotes several valuable Branches of Trade, by the frequent Resort of the genteeler people; but as it also keeps alive, and improves the social and benevolent Affections, by the general Intercourse of Friends and Acquaintances, which it occasions'.<sup>29</sup> Endowed with good business acumen, Avison knew how to keep the control of the concerts he had established and fend off all possible opposition or competition, as was the case when a young Irishman from Waterford, Charles Claget, advertised his intention to give a benefit concert.<sup>30</sup>

In 1763, Avison collaborated with Giardini — a composer for whom he expressed great admiration in the *Essay* and who had performed at the Subscription Concerts in Newcastle in 1759<sup>31</sup> — on the composition of a section of a sacred work, the oratorio *Ruth*. The work was to be performed at the Lock Hospital, London, an institution founded in 1746 for those suffering from venereal diseases. The music was to have been written by Charles Avison, Felice Giardini and (possibly) William Boyce to a libretto by the assistant chaplain of the hospital, Thomas Haweis, and performed on 15 April 1763, but Boyce eventually declined because of illness and Avison set the third part in addition to the first. *Ruth* was repeated, but with only Giardini's setting, on 13 February 1765 and 25 May 1768.<sup>32</sup> Avison's music has unfortunately been lost.

Avison married Catherine Reynolds on 15 January 1737. They had nine children, only three of whom survived into adulthood: Jane (1744-1773), Edward (1747-1776) and Charles (1751-1795). Edward succeeded his father as organist of

St. Nicholas and musical director of the Newcastle Musical Society (with Charles Avison's pupil William Shield)<sup>33</sup> until the Newcastle concert series were discontinued in 1813. Edward was a friend of John Wesley's. Converted to Methodism, he became a trustee of the Orphan House in Northumberland Street.<sup>34</sup> Charles Jnr was also a musician, with various appointments as organist in Newcastle, especially at St. Nicholas from 1789, where he succeeded Matthias Hawdon (who had succeeded Edward Avison in 1776),<sup>35</sup> and he composed several works and published a hymn collection.

The last text published by Charles Avison Snr, the year before his death, is proof of his faithful attachment to his master Geminiani and a moving testimonial to Avison's belief in the soothing power of music:

On viewing a portrait of the late celebrated GEMINIANI.

WHILE contending nations alarm the world abroad, and interiour commotions at home, I peruse *thy* pacific page, and wonder where the powers of music are fled not to harmonise the passions of men; yet still the dulcet strains will live in congenial souls, to smooth the path of life which providence has given to lovers of harmony.

Newcastle.

C.A.<sup>36</sup>

The interesting article (already mentioned) written by some friend of Avison<sup>37</sup> and published in *The Newcastle Journal* in 1759 drew a touching portrait of the composer as a charming, cultured and sincere man whose chief interest lay in music.<sup>38</sup> His obituary of 12 May 1770 equally confirmed the impression of his having been a man a good character and amiable disposition:

On Thursday died Mr. Charles Avison, upwards of thirty years organist in this town. His loss is greatly lamented by all that had the pleasure of his acquaintance, for he was as much valued for the amiableness of his private character as admired for his skill in the profession, and for his excellent compositions.<sup>39</sup>

Charles Avison was buried in St. Andrew's Churchyard in Newcastle.

### Charles Avison as Composer

As a composer, Charles Avison presents us with a kind of paradox. Although he was a professional musician who lived from his art and enjoyed an enviable reputation, not only in and around his home town but even in London,<sup>40</sup> he mainly composed works intended for amateur musicians and mixed provincial orchestras, and he restricted the field of his creative activity almost entirely to two types of works: the accompanied keyboard sonata, and the string concerto. With the exception of a few isolated compositions (the oratorio *Ruth*; a Verse Anthem 'Hast thou not forsaken us?'; A *Christmas Hymn* 'Glory to God on High'), and in spite of his admiration for the works of Clari and Marcello, he cannot be said to have been a composer of vocal music, which comes as a surprise in a period when the

dominant form was the serenata, ode, or oratorio set by Handel. As we shall see later, Avison thought that music had limited imitative powers, and he may have felt little inclination for writing music to a text that might have constrained his freedom of expression. On the other hand, he proved to be a 'compulsive concerto-writer', as Owain Edwards put it, writing 'twice as many concertos as his nearest "rivals", Corbett, with three dozen, and Felton, with thirty-two'.<sup>41</sup> However, he revised some of his own works and re-published them under different opus numbers, with various transpositions or substitutions of different movements. Like his avowed models, Corelli and Geminiani, Avison chose to hone his compositions and to try them repeatedly before having them printed.

It is another paradox that, although stylistically his music looked back to the 'baroque' idiom of the string concerto inherited from Corelli and Geminiani, Avison reacted against the 'ancients' in his theoretical writings. However, he proved more innovative in the field of the accompanied sonata. He introduced Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin en concert* (1741) at the Newcastle concerts in the early 1750s. This was quite innovative, considering the prevailing distaste for French music in eighteenth-century England. His own keyboard compositions (op. 5, 7 and 8) then followed after Rameau's pattern, consisting as they did in virtuoso keyboard pieces in a complex style with independent accompaniment for two violins and cello.<sup>42</sup> Avison's choice of Rameau as a model is interesting in that it shows his lack of interest in the type of keyboard concerto with ritornellos made popular by Handel, which he criticised in the *Essay*:

I shall beg Leave to offer an Observation on the Harpsichord Concerto; a Species of Composition but of late Invention, and which, if properly studied, will admit of considerable Improvements. Hitherto we seem to have mistaken the property of this Instrument, by not considering what it can, or cannot express. Hence it is, perhaps, that our Composers have run all their Concertos into little else than tedious Divisions; and the Subject or Ground-Work of these, being introduced and repeated by a Chorus of Violins, produce always a bad effect: Whereas the Violin Parts should be but few, and contrived rather as Accompaniments than Symphonies; by which Means they may assist greatly in striking out some Kind of Expression, wherein the Harpsichord is remarkably deficient. [*Essay*, p. 50]<sup>43</sup>

True, an early score by Avison printed in Newcastle by Joseph Barber in 1742 bears the following title: *Two Concertos, the First for an Organ or Harpsicord, in eight Parts, the Second for Violins in seven Parts*, and his op. 2 concertos, first published in 1740, were re-issued by Walsh as harp, or organ concertos in 1747,<sup>44</sup> but this was certainly more a commercial move on the part of the publisher than Avison's own decision as a composer. In the preface to his op. 9, Avison explained that the sonatas therein could be played in several different ways: 'To render them more generally useful, they are either adapted to the Practice of the Organ or Harpsicord alone, or these to serve as an Accompaniment to the Violin Parts.' Obviously, a commercial intention can be perceived there, as was the case with those innumerable *voluntaries* published at the time, which, though originally

intended for the organ, were sold as suitable for both the organ and the harpsichord, or, later, the forte-piano, so as to broaden potential sales.

Involved as he was in the musical life around Newcastle and Durham, Avison was obviously sensitive to the needs and demands of local musicians. As John Brewer has remarked, provincial musical life depended on different factors:

The dancing master, organist, singer and military band player were all necessary to create a good provincial concert, but none of them was as vital as the gentleman amateur, at once player, impresario and social secretary of the provincial concert scene.<sup>45</sup>

Avison knew the 'people of quality' in Newcastle, as is evidenced by the dedication of his compositions to several Ladies, some of whom were among his own pupils: such was the case with his op. 3 Concertos which were dedicated to his pupil, Mrs. Ord, née Dillingham, who was the wealthy chatelaine of Fenham Hall and whose husband was High Sheriff of Northumberland from 1747. A fine musician who had been 'taught the elements, and to perform on the harpsichord, by Mr. Keeble, a master in the highest esteem among the first nobility and gentry of his time',<sup>46</sup> she gave musical evenings and blue-stocking parties attended, amongst others, by Elizabeth Montagu. Another pupil of Avison was Lady Milbanke, the wife of Sir Ralph Milbanke, fifth baronet. She became a proficient harpsichordist. Avison, whom she certainly introduced to the best society, dedicated his op. 4 Concertos to her.<sup>47</sup> His Sonatas op. 5 of 1756 were dedicated to Lady Blackett, the wife of Walter Blackett, sometime Lord Mayor of Newcastle. Considered to be 'an agreeable, well-informed, and gentlemanlike man of the world', Avison thus 'directed the musical opinions of his circle to his own taste, and, in some instances, prejudices', *The Gentleman's Magazine* reported in 1808.<sup>48</sup>

Among the many difficulties to be overcome in provincial concerts were the standards of execution, the variety of instruments and performers available, and the accessibility to a new repertoire. One of the characteristics of concerts in the North-East of England in the eighteenth century was that there was no clear divide between professional musicians and 'Gentlemen amateurs'.<sup>49</sup> A newspaper advert betrays the need for Avison the concert-organiser to find appropriate musicians: 'Any person that can play well upon the Violin and Hautboy and tune a Harpsichord, will meet with very good encouragement, upon applying to Mr. Charles Avison, in Newcastle upon Tyne'.<sup>50</sup> Avison's own compositions may well have been geared towards the particular requirements of the orchestras that could be assembled for the concerts organised in Newcastle. As he made clear in the Preface to his op. 3 Concertos (1751), he intended the number of instruments required for the performance of his pieces to be limited:

AND 1<sup>st</sup>, I would propose, exclusive of the four principal Parts, which must be always complete, that the *Chorus* of other Instruments should not exceed the Number following. viz. six *Primo*, and four *secondo Ripienos*; four *Ripieno Basses*, and two Double *Basses*, and a *Harpsichord*. A lesser Number of Instruments, near the same Proportion, will also have a proper Effect, and may



answer the Composer's Intention; but more would probably destroy the just Contrast, which should always be kept up between the *Chorus* and *Solo*.  
 ['Preface', pp. 161-2]

Several issues coalesce here: the need and intention to propose works that can be performed by a rather small band of musicians such as could be gathered in a provincial town the size of Newcastle; the assertion of a moderate aesthetic stance which shuns excess and bombast; a deliberate alignment with the models set by Corelli and Geminiani; and, consequently, the partial rejection of the more robust idiom favoured and developed by Handel. All these elements were given their proper theoretical elaboration in Avison's *Essay* and his various 'Prefaces' and 'Advertisements'.

All this is not to say, however, that Avison's music lacks vitality. Among his most popular works, the concertos after Scarlatti's harpsichord sonatas evince a buoyancy and energy which, as Catherine Margaret Eckersley has underlined, is 'much closer in style to the *stravaganze* of Vivaldi than he [Avison] would have wished, or was perhaps even aware'.<sup>51</sup> Although he expressed in his *Essay* the view that 'extravagant' music was not to be condoned, he admired Scarlatti's music enough<sup>52</sup> to use it as the ground-work for those 12 concerti which turn out to be dynamic, energetic pieces.<sup>53</sup> Laurence Sterne did not fail to pick this out in *Tristram Shandy*, in which he mentioned, precisely, one of the wildest movements in the Avison-Scarlatti concertos, the one with the expressive mention '*con furia*':<sup>54</sup> '[...] the whole piece, Madam, must have been played off like the sixth of Avison Scarlatti — *con furia* — like mad'.<sup>55</sup> There again, then, Avison appears to be something of a paradox, fluctuating between the two poles of 'baroque' exuberance and 'neo-classical' moderation (if such broad generalisation as this can be forgiven).

Charles Avison had chosen thirty of the sonatas published by Roseingrave as the starting-point for his twelve concerti grossi in four movements. Yet, as Scarlatti's original compositions essentially consisted of allegros, Avison had to add slow movements, borrowed mainly from violin sonatas by Scarlatti.<sup>56</sup> The opposition between '*ripieno*' and '*concertino*' introduced by Avison corresponds to the opposition between '*forte*' and '*piano*' on the harpsichord, and the concertos therefore throw light on how Scarlatti would have been performed at the time, as Richard Newton underlines.<sup>57</sup> But beyond this historical interest, Avison's work shows great imagination and skill in the re-writing for strings of music first intended for the keyboard, the concertos being indeed very effective ensemble works in their own right.

Published in 1744 with an impressive list of 149 individual subscribers (plus a few musical Societies), and dedicated to Mrs. Bowes, these concertos were often performed in the second half of the century and became part of the standard 'amateur' repertoire in the provinces until the end of the century, as is evidenced by John Marsh's numerous mentions of them in his diary.<sup>58</sup> Although Charles Avison remained a provincial musician who limited the scope of his output almost entirely to compositions belonging to a couple of specific genres, he undoubtedly achieved a certain degree of success as a composer, probably because he wrote in

an idiom which was easily accessible to a large number of both amateur and professional musicians nurtured on the music of Corelli. It is a shame, in a way, that he should so often be remembered only for the air 'Sound the loud Timbrel', which was only a poor adaptation of a concerto movement. His greatest fame he owed indeed to his *Essay on Musical Expression* which was to prove a cornerstone in the debate on music in England in the eighteenth century, but his music, though not ground-breaking, is certainly worthy of being played and heard.<sup>59</sup>

### Avison's Recommendations on Musical Performance

It is indeed as a composer that Avison first began to develop his theoretical ideas on music in the preface to his *6 Concertos in 7 Parts* op. 3, dedicated to Mrs. Ord, which he published in 1751. His admiration for Geminiani probably prompted him to emulate the latter, whose *Treatise of Good taste in the Art of Musick*, published in London in 1749, gave a certain number of recommendations to performers and paved the way for Avison's own endeavour.<sup>60</sup> In the op. 3 Preface, which is devoted to 'the expressive Performances of Music in Parts', Avison introduced 'a new Character ..., namely, that of the Mostra, V or Index' which, 'placed over the first Note of every *accidental* Subject as well as *principal*', could help the performer better understand how to read the composition and perform it more accurately. Probably reacting against the irksome, lopsided kind of performance that he must have been an unwilling witness to in his native Newcastle, Avison advocated a clear understanding of the music as the necessary condition for decent standards of execution. For him, playing from the 'score' was best. His decision to publish his op. 3, 4 and 6 again as *Twenty-Six Concertos... in Score* in 1758 was inspired by Pepusch's edition of Corelli's concertos and sonatas in full score (c.1740) and Geminiani's op. 2 & 3 (1755). Full score editions were not the common practice at the time. It is interesting to note that, at the end of the century, the amateur musician John Marsh — who, incidentally, was conversant with Avison's concertos — advocated the very same practice.<sup>61</sup> A didactic purpose was manifest there: Geminiani, Avison or Marsh saw a particular merit in full score editions in that they enabled the performer, and in particular the amateur musician, to see and grasp the relationship between the various parts of the composition, as Avison underlined in the 'Advertisement' prefixed to his *26 Concertos* published 'in Score' in 1758:

For being thus enabled to judge, at one view, of the laws and effects of harmony, those various *Melodies*, *Accompanyments*, and *Measures*, which constitute the WHOLE OF A MUSICAL DESIGN, are immediately traced, and their beauties as well as defects ascertained, not only as it renders the study of music more easy and entertaining, but also the performance of it more correct and judicious. ['Advertisement', p. 173]

The 'mostra' was intended to 'remedy the defect' of musicians not paying attention to 'every *leading* and *responsive* Fugue', or, to put it differently, it was

introduced in order to facilitate a proper 'expression' in the performance by drawing the performers' attention to the primary, and secondary, parts in the composition. The very notion of 'expression' developed by Charles Avison thus stemmed from his didactic and practical aim of rendering the execution of the music as good as possible. Although his desire to publish the music in score-form testifies to the fact that he was not solely interested in air set to a figured bass, but in the texture resulting from the careful combination of the parts, he did not consider polyphonic writing as a purely abstract construction of independent parts. He thought the aim of music was to move the listener, and expression was both the ultimate goal and the necessary condition for this aim to be reached. One should bear in mind his provincial situation, and the fact that he intended his music to be accessible to both amateur and professional players. As a practising musician, Avison was a pragmatist, and his various recommendations testify to his having actually performed his, and other musicians', works in concert. Avison's starting point was to give advice to those purchasing his music as to the way it could be performed adequately. His writings are therefore worth reading for what they tell us about performing practices in the eighteenth century.

The first, and most important, characteristic of Avison's general 'philosophy' concerning musical performance, is his general insistence on the overall moderation of effects — a moderation which finds its theoretical and ethical justification in the *Essay*, as we shall see later. In particular, Avison gives precise indications concerning the size and strength of the ensemble he intends his string concertos to be performed by, as we have already noted. Contrary to the tendency towards an increase in the number of singers and players that developed at the end of the century, in particular after the great Handel Commemoration at Westminster in 1784,<sup>62</sup> Avison insisted on the economical use of the instruments. Rather than the overall volume or mass of sound, what mattered for him was 'the just Contrast ...between the *Chorus* and *Solo*' [*Essay*, p. 48], and between *piano* and *forte*. And, to drive his point home, he gave the example of the Swell-Organ, which can transport 'the lessening Sounds to a vast Distance, and thence [return] with redoubled Strength and Fullness to the Forte' [*Essay*, p. 53]

The same prudence applies to the use of wind instruments, of which Avison is extremely sparing. Underlining 'the irremediable Disagreement of their rising in their Pitch, while the [strings] are probably falling', he recommends that they should not 'be continued too long in Use', with the exception of the Bassoon which may 'add Fullness to the Harmony' [*Essay*, p. 48]. As for the continuo instruments, viz. the harpsichord or organ, they should also be played as it were cautiously, so that they support the whole ensemble rather than become solo instruments:

... as this is only to be used in the Chorus, the Performer will have little else to regard but the striking just Chords, keeping the Time, and being careful, that no jangling Sound, or scattering of the Notes be continued after the *Pause* or *Cadence*. [...] In fine, a profound Silence must be always observed, wherever the Composer has intended a general Respit or Pause in his Work. I am the more particular in giving this Caution to Performers on the Harpsicord, as they are the most liable to transgress in this Way; because their Instrument,

lying so commodious to their Fingers, is ever tempting them to run, like Wild-fire, over the Keys, and thus perpetually interrupt the Performance. As Compositions of this Nature are not calculated for the Sake of any one Instrument, but to give a grand Effect by uniting many, each Performer ought therefore to consider his particular Province... [Essay, p. 49]

Writing about solo performance, Avison explains it does not consist in 'those agile Motions, or Shiftings of the Hand which strike with Surprize the common Ear, but in the tender and delicate Touches, which so such indeed are least perceptible, but to a fine Ear productive of the highest Delight' [Essay, p. 51]. Quite interestingly, then, Avison advises never to strike chords in the right hand in the accompaniment of the thorough-bass, and to 'proceed thro' the rest of the Movement with the left Hand only'. Even the solo parts should be played with restraint and a delicate touch: Avison is manifestly hostile to virtuoso antics and disapproves of a gratuitous display of performing skills, or excessive ornamentation used by some performers 'merely from a Desire of being distinguished':

Let not the Performer then by an ill-judged Execution, misapply this Opportunity of shewing his Skill... he should avoid all extravagant Decorations, since every Attempt of this Kind must utterly destroy whatever Passion the Composer may have designed to express. [Essay, p. 51]

He makes fun of the organist who 'is too often so fond of his own Conceits; that with his absurd Graces, and tedious and ill connected Interludes, he misleads or confounds his Congregation, instead of being the rational Guide and Director of the whole' [Essay, p. 36]. The accompaniment should never be too loud. And the harpsichord player should pay special attention to the quality of the touch, and avoid 'the *Staccato*, or invariable marking of the Notes *by means of the Wrist*' ['Advertisement', p. 170]. It is therefore 'requisite that the Fingers be kept up in the Keys as much as possible' ['Advertisement', p. 177]. As for the organ — which, like the harpsichord, Avison finds 'deficient' in Expression (unless it is a 'swell-organ, or [one of] those harpsicords that express the *Forte-piano*'<sup>63</sup>) — it may 'over-power and destroy' the harmony 'if the Performer is not extremely cautious and tender in the Use of it' [Essay, p. 50].

Contrast, then, is what matters primarily in music. Good expression will result from a constantly varied, alternately swelling and diminishing sound:

...the very Essence of Expression depending on the incessant Encrease or Diminution of Sounds: Whereas, to continue *single Sounds*, or any *Succession of Sounds*, in one unvary'd Degree of Loudness... would debase at once the expressive Art of Harmony, and the Use of those delightful Instruments by which we are so powerfully affected. ['Advertisement', p. 168]

But Avison even warns the 'unexperienced' performer, that loudness and speed are not the same thing:

...it is almost a general Practice to *abate* the *Time* where the Sounds are *diminished*; as also where the Sounds are *increased* to *quicken* the *Time*; whereas, to give a spirited Movement its proper force, we should neither *retard* the *Piano*, nor *precipitate* the *Forte*. ['Advertisement', p. 168]

Through all these recommendations, what comes out is the classical ethos of balance, control, and moderation in art which turns its back on baroque exuberance and ornamentation. Avison's numerous recommendations concerning performance testify to his striving to set expression at the very centre of the musical experience, and to define good expression as a quality that can result only from a just balance of all the parameters in the performance. Though his own composition-style looked backwards to the tradition of Corelli, his stance, as expressed in his didactic 'Prefaces' and 'Advertisements', can be said to have been a neo-classical one.

### ***An Essay on Musical Expression: Origins, Aim and Method***

Whereas Avison's 'mostra' — the offspring, no doubt, of his experience as a music-teacher and band-leader — never came into general use, the op. 3 preface spawned several ideas which Avison took up in his subsequent writings, such as his insistence upon the notion of expression, the recommendations concerning performance, the formulation of an ideal of moderation and energy, or the analogy between musical signs and the rules of spelling and grammar. The op. 3 preface apparently gave him the idea of writing the *Essay on Musical Expression*, published the following year (1752), as he made clear in the *Reply to the Remarks on the Essay on Musical Expression* (1753):

...when I had determined to publish some Thoughts on the Subject of Music, by way of Preface to my last Concertos, I found my first Design, of writing Directions to Performers only, grew so much upon my Hands, that I could not resist the Temptation, however unequal to the Task, of extending them also to the Practice of Composition. [*Reply*, p. 132]

The *Essay* ends where the op. 3 preface — quoted verbatim at the end of the *Essay* — had begun. Whereas the preface was intended for the performers of the concertos it introduced, the *Essay* was however much broader in scope. 'Performance' was only dealt with in the third and last part, whereas the first part was devoted to the powers of music and the analogy between painting and music, and the second part to musical expression as it relates to composition. As Charles Burney himself conceded in the 'Essay on Musical Criticism' set at the beginning of book III of his *General History of Music*, Avison's *Essay* could be considered as the first attempt at musical criticism in England:

Indeed, musical criticism has been so little cultivated in our country, that its first elements are hardly known. In justice to the late Mr. Avison, it must be owned, that he was the first, and almost the only writer, who attempted it. But his judgment was warped by many prejudices. He exalted Rameau and

Geminiani at the expence of Handel, and was a declared foe to modern German symphonies.<sup>64</sup>

Accused by William Hayes in his *Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression* of not being the author of the *Essay*, Avison readily admitted in his *Reply to the Remarks on the Essay on Musical Expression* that he had benefited from the assistance of some friends. The members of the 'Junto' virulently denounced by Hayes were not named, but they probably included a group of literary and musical acquaintances of Avison's in and around Newcastle. Norris Lynn Stephens suggests the following names amongst the likely contributors to the *Essay* in one way or other: the poet Thomas Gray,<sup>65</sup> Dr. John Jortin, Robert Shaftoe, and, above all, William Mason and Dr. John Brown.<sup>66</sup> Avison's Durham-based friend John Garth may also have contributed. William Mason (1725-1797) was a poet and amateur musician of many talents, whose interests ranged from gardening and poetry to music. Once ordained, he became canon and precentor at York Minster. A friend of Thomas Gray, Horace Walpole, William Wilberforce, John Marsh and, of course, Charles Avison, he wrote a collection of *Essays on English Church Music* (1795) as well as dramatic poems (*Elfrida*, *Caractacus*) set to music by such composers as Arne or Giardini. He was also one of the first musicians in England to show real interest for the forte-piano.<sup>67</sup> In the third of his *Essays on English Church Music*, Mason quoted Avison's *Essay* and referred to their friendship explicitly: 'And here let me fly again to Authority for refuge. Let me take it from a great and professed Harmonist, the late Mr. Charles Avison, with whom I was happy long ago to be acquainted'.<sup>68</sup> As for Dr. Brown, he certainly was a formidable figure. After graduating from St. John's College, Cambridge, he became a minor canon and lecturer of Carlisle Cathedral and then Chaplain to the Bishop. From 1761 until his death in 1766, he was the vicar of St. Nicholas Church, Newcastle, the very church whose organist Avison was, hence their probable collaboration for the *Essay*. Brown was the author of several works: *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1758), *Dissertation on the Rise, Union and Power... of Poetry and Music* (1763), *Essays on the Characteristics* (1764), *Thoughts on civil Liberty, on Licentiousness and Factions* (1765), and a tragedy, *Barbarossa* (published in 1777). He received an invitation from the Empress of Russia to act as an adviser on general education, but ill health prevented him from taking up the task, and he eventually committed suicide in a fit of depression.<sup>69</sup> Brown mentioned Avison's *Essay* in his *Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power... of Poetry and Music*: writing about the character of English Cathedral Music, he insisted on the necessity of avoiding both 'too studious a Regard to *Fugues* and an artificial *Counterpoint*', and 'too *airy* and *light* a Turn', for these extremes 'tend equally, though from opposite Causes, to destroy *musical Expression*',<sup>70</sup> remarks which are very much in line with Avison's claims in the *Essay*. Whether they actually wrote any part of the *Essay* or not, Avison's friends no doubt exchanged ideas and opinions with him on the question of musical expression, while the elegance of the style of the *Essay* testifies to his having been a well-read and accomplished gentleman, whose circle of acquaintances shared in his musical and literary interests.

What is actually noteworthy in Avison's approach is the fact that he endeavoured to write for the general public, and not, as had been the case so far, for professional musicians or the *cognoscenti*. The very fact he should feel it necessary to define such technical terms as 'melody', 'harmony', 'modulation', 'cadence', at the beginning of the *Essay* shows that he 'anticipated a lay audience', as Rosemary Southey puts it.<sup>71</sup> 'The public Inclination for Music seems every Day advancing', Avison stated in the very first sentence of the *Essay*. What was at stake was not the intricate mechanism of the science of music such as it was analysed in a number of abstruse scholastic and technical works,<sup>72</sup> but the question of the universal taste shared by a growing audience. Nor was Avison's perspective that of an 'antiquarian': although the *Essay* begins with a long quotation from Polybius concerning the power of music, followed by Montesquieu's comments on it, Avison was primarily concerned with the music of his own time. In the second edition of the *Essay*, followed by his *Reply* to William Hayes's *Remarks* on his *Essay*, Avison included an anonymous *Letter to the Author, concerning the Music of the Ancients* (eventually attributed to Dr. Jortin in the third edition of 1775), but the very fact that Avison did not write it himself testifies to the little interest he personally took in the question of the music of the ancients,<sup>73</sup> contrary to both John Hawkins and Charles Burney, for instance, who devoted lengthy pages to the discussion of the merits and demerits of ancient Greek music in their respective *Histories of Music*.

Writing as he meant to do for a large, non-specialist (albeit refined) reading public, Avison was careful to avoid too technical a vocabulary. Instead, he resorted to the method of analogy, so that musical issues could be dealt with in terms of some other art or science more familiar to the reader. Section II of the first part of the *Essay* is devoted to a study of the analogies between music and painting:

... as there are several Resemblances, or Analogies between this Art and that of *Painting*, which is an Art much more obvious in its Principles, and therefore more generally known; it may not be amiss to draw out some of the most striking of these Analogies; and by this Means, in some Degree at least, give the common Reader an Idea of musical Composition. [*Essay*, p. 11]

Avison's first obvious intention was to tackle music in clear, simple terms, and therefore to turn his back on the scholastic tradition which had surrounded music in dark, obscure language: he wrote 'for the Sake of those who are not particularly conversant in the Theory of Music' [*Essay*, p. 14]. Doing so, he presented himself, not primarily as a professional musician, but as a man of common sense, whose remarks on music were meant to be accessible to anyone endowed with a normal ability to listen. Resorting to the analogical method implied therefore that *taste*, which can be shared by all kinds of people, mattered more than the formal rules of the art. Besides, Avison endeavoured at the same time to upgrade music by putting it on a par with painting, or even literature, as he did in the Preface to his op. 9 Concertos, by drawing an analogy between 'musical air and grammar'.<sup>74</sup> And, once more resorting to the same method, he went as far as drawing an analogy between fugue and history painting.

As Laurence Lipking rightly underlined, 'the analogies rob the criticism of specific reference to music, and leave it vague and unsupported'.<sup>75</sup> The last example mentioned, that of the analogy between fugue and history painting, is a good example of this: the only thing that substantiates the analogy is the fact that, for the English artist of the eighteenth century, both fugue and history painting were considered as the highest forms in the arts of music and painting; they were both pregnant with dignity and seriousness, and were defined by precise compositional rules, which guaranteed they would stand the test of time and confer on English art that sublimity and respectability to which it aspired.

Yet, Avison was at a loss to develop the analogy and vindicate it. Similarly, Avison's comparing Handel to Dryden [*Reply*, p. 149] enabled him to put the great German-born composer on a pedestal without actually making it clear where his talent lay. The analogical method, therefore, was used as a substitute for theoretical demonstration. This is nowhere more manifest than where the very notion of expression, which is central to Charles Avison's theory of music, is concerned. As we shall see hereafter, the importance of musical expression is asserted without it ever having been properly defined.<sup>76</sup> To understand how Avison came about it, it is important first to consider the new perspective he adopted on music, and, in particular, his new approach concerning the question of musical imitation.

## Imitation

The discussion of the relative importance of the notions of imitation and expression, and harmony and melody, did not start with Charles Avison, of course. A gradual evolution in the theory of music can be perceived in the course of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century, most theorists still tended to lay the emphasis on imitation as a basic concept in the definition of art in general and, consequently, of music in particular. Art was supposed to take its cue from nature, and it was by copying, or imitating, the latter that the beautiful in art could be attained. When, in his essay *Of the Sister Arts* of 1734, Hildebrand Jacob asserted that the arts 'proceed chiefly from the same principles, Imitation and Harmony, so they are mutually assistant to each other, and ought to dwell much together',<sup>77</sup> he was expressing the conception that constituted the foundation of baroque art, and, in particular, of opera. Indeed, the result from such an approach was that music was subservient to the words of the libretto which it was supposed, as it were, to clothe. Where, as in the case of instrumental music, imitation proved less obvious because of the lack of explicit referents, the search for a perfect 'mathematical' order (or 'harmony') was substituted for imitation. For Francis Hutcheson, for example, beauty was associated both with the notion of 'uniformity amid variety',<sup>78</sup> and with mathematical concepts of order and harmony. Thus, one way or the other, music was never considered autonomously, but always in its relation to some other subtext, whether poetical or more abstractly mathematical.

James Harris, in his influential *Three Treatises* (1744), still considered that all the arts were basically mimetic,<sup>79</sup> yet he acknowledged that, in so far as they all resorted to different means, they were not equally efficient in their imitations.



Music, Harris remarked, can imitate 'all such Things and Incidents *as are most eminently characterised by Motion and Sound*' [pp. 65-6], but it is not equally apt to imitate other objects or qualities: 'Music, passing to the Mind thro' the *Organ of the Ear*, can imitate only by *Sounds and Motions*' [p. 57]. As Harris attempted a comparison between poetry, painting, and music, and since the criterion used for this comparison was the excellence of the imitation, music was inevitably rated lower than poetry or painting. The source of the effect of music on us had therefore to be traced elsewhere: 'It must be confessed, that musical Imitation is greatly below that of Painting, and that at best it is but an imperfect Thing. As to the *Efficacy* therefore of Music, it must be derived from *another Source*' [p. 69]. This initiated a shift from a conception whereby music was thought to imitate things exactly to one where its power 'consists not in Imitations, and the raising *Ideas*; but in the raising *Affections*, to which *Ideas* may correspond' [p. 99]. Put another way, similarity now mattered more than identity. Moreover, Harris's theory led him quite naturally to assert that music is 'an *Ally to Poetry*' [p. 95], since poetry is needed to qualify the imperfect imitation proposed by music. Poetry and music are therefore more powerful when used together or united [p. 102]. In other words, Harris did not grant the art of music its full autonomy.

Starting from, and actually referring to, Harris, Charles Avison went one step further; for him, music was definitely not an imitative art: 'Music as an imitative Art has very *confined Powers*' [*Essay*, p. 25], he claimed. In a notable passage, he made fun of the practice of musical word-painting by some composers:

...some very eminent Composers have attached themselves chiefly to the Method here mentioned; and seem to think they have exhausted all the Depths of expression, by a dextrous Imitation of the Meaning of a few particular Words, that occur in the Hymns or songs which they set to Music. Thus, were one of these Gentlemen to express the following Words of *Milton*,

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Their Songs  
*Divide* the Night, and *Lift* our Thoughts  
 to Heav'n.

It is highly probable, that upon the Word *divide*, he would run a *Division* of half a Dozen Bars; and on the subsequent Part of the Sentence, he would not think he had done the Poet Justice, or *risen* to that *Height* of Sublimity which he ought to express, till he had climbed up to the very Top of his Instrument, or at least as far as a human Voice could follow him. [*Essay*, pp. 24-5 ]

Music, then, could only imitate such objects as were intrinsically similar to itself, such as sounds and motions.<sup>80</sup> As for other objects, Avison thought music could imitate them only through a phenomenon of association of ideas. In this respect, Avison can be said to foreshadow the theory of the so-called 'associationists' such as Alexander Gerard and Archibald Alison,<sup>81</sup> who considered that any object of perception produced a twofold result in the mind: first, a primary emotion which initiated the whole affective process, and then an exercise of the imagination itself, in other words a chain of associated ideas. The autonomous

activity of the mind was thus thought to be productive of additional pleasure in the aesthetic experience. Avison himself did not pursue his idea that far, yet he talked about a 'Method of Association' and considered that 'the Capacity of receiving Pleasure from these musical Sounds, [was], in Fact, a peculiar and internal Sense' [*Essay*, p. 5].<sup>82</sup> His rejection of the mimetic powers of music for all objects outside sounds and motions laid the stress on another power of music: that of 'raising passions' in the mind. This inevitably entailed, in its turn, that a strict adherence to rules became less important than it used to be. This, as we shall see, was of course one of the main points where William Hayes and Charles Avison disagreed, which prompted the former to write his vitriolic attack on the *Essay*. The criteria whereby the quality of any given composition could be assessed were therefore redefined: rather than the quality (or exactness) of a dubious 'imitation', what now mattered was the impact of the music on the listener:

Thus the gradual rising or falling of the Notes in a long Succession, is often used to denote Ascent or Descent, broken Intervals, to denote an interrupted Motion, a Number of quick Divisions, to describe Swiftness or Flying, Sounds resembling Laughter, to describe Laughter; with a Number of other Contrivances of a parallel Kind, which it is needless here to mention. Now all these I should chuse to stile Imitation, rather than Expression; because, it seems to me, that their Tendency is rather to fix the Hearers Attention on the Similitude between the Sounds and the Things which they describe, and thereby to excite a reflex Act of the Understanding, than to affect the Heart and raise the Passions of the Soul. [*Essay*, p. 24]

The questions of imitation and expression are thus closely interdependent. If music is not imitative, then the strict subordination of music to words becomes irrelevant. Whereas imitation used to be the very test of the art, Avison considers that music works in a different manner from poetry, and this opens up a new theoretical paradigm. Having discarded imitation as the condition for 'true musical expression', Avison has to define the means whereby this can be achieved. This he does by suggesting that only a 'happy Mixture of Air and Harmony' can achieve it:

WHAT then is the Composer, who would aim at true musical Expression, to perform? I answer, he is to blend such an happy Mixture of Air and Harmony, as will affect us most strongly with the Passions or Affections which the Poet intends to raise: and that, on this Account, he is not principally to dwell on particular Words in the Way of Imitation, but to comprehend the Poet's general Drift or Intention, and on this to form his Airs and Harmony, either by Imitation (so far as Imitation may be proper to this End) or by any other Means. [*Essay*, p. 28]

The divorce of music from the semantic is a decisive step in the movement towards the theoretical autonomy of music. Following on from Avison, other writers on aesthetics in general and music in particular, such as Dr. John Brown, James Beattie, Thomas Twining, or Adam Smith,<sup>83</sup> were to insist upon the non-mimetic nature of music, and, consequently, its autonomy as an artistic medium.

## Melody and Harmony

The novelty of Avison's position was not limited to the question of imitation. As was clearly evidenced by the long-lasting argument between Rameau and Rousseau in France, one of the key issues of the discourse on music in the eighteenth century was the question of the relative importance of harmony and melody. As from his *Traité de l'harmonie*,<sup>84</sup> Rameau averred that harmony, not melody, was the basis of all music. This implied of course that there was a correspondence between musical harmony and the underlying order of the universe. According to Rameau's theory, there exists a natural sense of harmony within man, which enables him to hear the fundamental bass to any melody. Rameau writes of the 'harmony which is in ourselves'.<sup>85</sup> As Catherine Kintzler has brilliantly shown, Rameau's theory was not a merely musical one, but the expression of a philosophical point of view:<sup>86</sup> what Rameau stood for was aesthetic cartesianism. He aimed at 'restoring reason in her own rights', as Catherine Kintzler puts it.<sup>87</sup> According to Rameau, reason is opposed to the appearance of things which is deceitful. Immediate sensitive experience is not to be trusted, for reason and nature can never be at variance with each other. What experience reveals should not contradict what reason teaches.<sup>88</sup> Whereas in a Lockean perspective the very notion of innate ideas was undermined in a way which laid the foundations of a new epistemology of sensations, Rameau remained convinced that experience could not have 'ontological precedence'<sup>89</sup> over reason. Therefore it ensued that only *rules* could guide the musician to compose music.

Rousseau, on the other hand, adopted a radically opposed standpoint. In his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*,<sup>90</sup> he stated that the very first form of music was melody, and that melody itself took its origin from spoken language. Melody, in other words, was a kind of imitation of the expressive tones of speech. This naturally led to his theory of the link between music and national language, and his claiming that the French language was ill-fitted to any musical expression whatsoever.<sup>91</sup> Harmony, on the other hand, he considered to be a 'gothic invention',<sup>92</sup> a super-imposed order which was a corruption of the 'natural', 'primal' melody. The onus he put on melody thus paved the way for the new kind of music that developed in the so-called 'age of sensibility'. There again, as in the case of Rameau's conception, Rousseau's musical theory had a far-reaching resonance: by opposition to Rameau's insistence on rules, Rousseau advocated freedom, using music as a political metaphor to support his theory of the corrupting power of society.

In England, the quarrel between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns' followed similar directions. The neo-platonic conception of a correspondence between universal order and musical harmony survived well into the eighteenth century. John Hawkins, to name but one, still upheld such a view during the second half of the century.<sup>93</sup> Numerous writers denounced the alleged negative influence of Italian music which favoured '*air*' over elaborate harmony or counterpoint. Such a position had strong ideological undertones, as is manifest, for instance, under the pen of Rvd. Arthur Bedford, who, in the first half of the century, explained that music was good in proportion to the number of parts in it:

But that we may the better judge of our *Divine* and other *Musick*, it will be necessary to consider, That the fullest *Musick* is the best. A *Consort of two Parts* is better than a *single Part* alone. *Three Parts* are better than *two*, and *four Parts* are better than *three*. In *Two Parts* we can hear but *one Concord* to the *Bass*. In *three Parts* we can hear but *two*, and in *four Parts* we can hear all *three*. This shews the Judgement of the *Composer*, because he can attend to all these things at once, and sometimes carry on the same *Air* and *Humour*, in every *Part*. He therefore who is acquainted with a *Consort of two Parts*, is not greatly delighted with the finest *Voice* or *Hand* alone. And he that is acquainted with a fuller *Consort* is not pleas'd with *two Parts*, except for the Sake of Variety, to add a greater Lustre to the fuller *Musick*, which doth afterward follow. Now in this, our *Composition* of *Songs* is extremely defective. There is not above one *Song* in ten, which consists of more than a *single Voice* to a *thorough Bass*.<sup>94</sup>

For him, as for John Hawkins, William Hayes or any of the various supporters of 'ancient' music, 'harmony' was a safeguard against the risk of too great flippancy in the music which was interpreted as analogous with moral degeneracy. The issues of musical formalism and morality coalesced in an ideological construction that left little room indeed for innovation or change, whether in the aesthetic, or ethical, field.

Now, Charles Avison's position in relation to this question turns out to be a very personal one. On the one hand, he believes, as we have seen, that 'the Capacity of receiving Pleasure from these musical Sounds, is, in Fact, a peculiar and internal Sense', which seems to echo Rameau's notion that the sense of harmony is inbred in man. He successively envisages the importance of both melody and harmony, and gives them the prime rank alternately:

*Melody* thus distinguished as the Foundation of a musical Composition, and compared to *Design* in Painting, hath been thought by some a vague and indeterminate Analogy; because *Harmony*, rather than *Melody*, ought to be esteemed the highest Excellence of every musical Work: Yet, though this be admitted, it may still justly be said, that *Melody* is, in Reality, the *Ground-Work*, as it is the *first Principle* which engages the Composer's Attention. [Essay, p. 11n]

Though melody can be considered as the 'ground-work', harmony is the 'cement', of all composition: the distinction is not, one realises, a very clear one. If, on the one hand, Avison seems to agree with Rameau that a sole interest for melody may prove illusive, on the other hand he blames the 'too severe Attachment of the Ancients to Harmony, and the Neglect of Modulation'. This apparent ambiguity or hesitation finds its solution, as it were, in Avison's introducing a third term to the equation: the very notion of *expression*, which enables him to outgrow the traditional opposition between melody and harmony. What he proposes as the ultimate goal of music is a perfect balance between harmony and melody, a balance considered as the necessary condition for real 'expression':