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### Abstract

In his poem describing a performance of a Baldassare Galuppi toccata, Robert Browning uses music theory terminology and historical context to explain the emotions inspired by the piece. Browning's 19th-century narrator reflects on the lives of past audiences and on his own mortality as he addresses the deceased composer. This paper analyzes the use of musical references in explaining the narrator's response to the performance. The analysis includes an examination of Galuppi's compositional period and a discussion of the specific terminology that Browning uses to convey his narrator's wariness of death.

### Keywords

Analysis, poetry, music, Browning

### Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles | Music | Poetry

### Comments

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Music Terminology and Context in Robert Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's"

In the fifteen stanzas of his poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's," Robert Browning uses a musical experience to guide a scientific mind through an earlier age and to a contemplation of mortality. Creating a 19th-century English scientist to serve as his narrator, Browning sets the work at a performance of a toccata by 18th-century Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi. The poet employs specific music terminology to demonstrate the transportive effect of a single piece on thoughts and emotions. The selected vocabulary also upholds the character of the scientist by letting him examine the logic of music even as his imagination carries him away. The particular focus on Galuppi, meanwhile, provides a definite destination for the wanderings of the narrator's mind, thus allowing for the shift to existential pondering. By incorporating references to music theory and history, Browning creates the ideal structure for a reflection on the impact of music and the finitude of life.

The development of the scientific persona as the listener begins with the title of the work. Browning specifies from the start both the genre and the composer of the piece described: the unnamed musician plays a toccata, or a solo piece designed to showcase technical skill, by an Italian composer who died seventy years before this poem's publication. The narrator later reiterates both "Galuppi" and "toccatas," displaying an awareness that presents him not as a casual listener but as an intent observer (line 1, 18). The speaker's fascination with this genre in

particular also lends itself to his scientific perspective, as the nature of a toccata welcomes a critical analysis of both compositional technique and performance capability. Galuppi composed during the late Baroque and early Classical periods, both of which focused on harmonic and structural patterns that could reappear in many works; such a formulaic approach would also likely appeal to a scientifically-inclined listener. Rather than examine the music's technical aspects with purely mathematical interest, however, Browning's narrator describes the theory of the piece in terms of his emotional reaction.

Before he begins introducing music theory terms, the speaker turns his thoughts to Galuppi's era and homeland. At the beginning of the poem, he addresses the dead composer in an emotional response to the toccata: "Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find! / I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind" (1-2). Here, the scientist indicates that the composer's intent in this piece comes through clearly, though he contemplates it "with such a heavy mind" (3). From this first impression, therefore, Browning portrays the narrator as receptive to the empathetic quality of music, shaping a listener who acknowledges and accepts the weighty reflections inspired by the toccata. The speaker then lets the "old music" lead him into an imagining of 18th-century Venice, shaping his speculations about the setting as questions to his mind's portrait of Galuppi (4). The historical context of the piece, particularly as it relates to the distinctively formulaic styles of late Baroque and early Classical composition, allows him to picture the frivolity of life in the composer's time and to place himself in its midst. The music, however, tinges these daydreams with sorrow for time past and lives lost, which the narrator discusses later in the poem.

While wandering through the setting in his mind's eye, the scientist envisions the scene of a concert played by Galuppi himself. He then transitions to an analysis of specific musical features and their emotional impact on the imagined 18th-century audience. To begin, the narrator asks, "What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh, / Told them something?" (19-20) This question serves as the first connection of musical technique to the despair suggested in the first stanza: the speaker refers to certain note intervals as having a mournful effect on listeners. Music theory defines thirds and sixths as imperfect consonances, which means that they sound pleasing to the ear without the hollowness of octaves and fifths, the perfect consonances. Whereas perfect consonances often denote some sort of conclusion, imperfect consonances establish the harmony of a progression and thus can appear many times in a row. What the narrator calls "[t]hose lesser thirds so plaintive," therefore, likely appear in the toccata as a multitude of minor chords, which generally create a melancholy tone. The "sixths diminished," meanwhile, add another layer of complexity to the emotion of the piece: though the imperfect consonance of a sixth pleases the ear, a diminished interval generally creates dissonance, which sounds unnatural and thus unsettles the listener. Here, further clarification by Browning would contribute to the analysis, because a true diminished sixth actually sounds like the perfect consonance of a fifth and would likely go unnoticed by an audience. The use of this particular term suggests that either the scientist has examined the written score of the piece, or the poet means something different by this phrase, perhaps referring to a chord rather than an interval.

In the remainder of the seventh stanza, the speaker intersperses technical music terms with quotes from his imaginary 18th-century crowd: "Those suspensions, those solutions— 'Must

we die?’ / Those commiserating sevenths– ‘Life might last! we can but try!’” (20-21) The first of these phrases refers not to note intervals but to the relationships between chords. Suspensions occur when a note belonging to one chord carries over to a different chord that clashes with it. The dissonance of the held note against the second chord creates tension, instilling unease in the listener, until it moves to a note that fits in the new chord. The narrator’s mention of “those solutions” refers to this resolution of the dissonant note to a consonance, at which the listener feels relief. The scientist’s pairing of suspensions and resolutions with the question of “Must we die?” relates the emotions inspired by the piece to those that accompany existential thinking. The imagined listener who poses the question may feel anxious at the thought of death, just as the suspension provokes anxiety, or perhaps the listener finds the joy of life in the satisfaction of the resolution. The emotions associated with such contemplations also find expression in the narrator’s next phrase, “Those commiserating sevenths.” Here, the terminology returns to note intervals, referencing a dissonance that often draws a musical phrase toward its close. The speaker’s describing them as “commiserating” suggests that sevenths emulate the unease of reflecting on death, and the relief of their resolution reflects the optimistic response: “Life might last! we can but try!”

The eighth stanza continues the voices of the 18th-century audience for two lines before offering another music reference. The narrator pictures the listeners discussing their happiness and reveling in their carefree lifestyle, then interrupts to say, “Hark, the dominant’s persistence till it must be answered to!” (24) The dominant, or the chord built on the fifth note of a scale, generally acts as preparation for the tonic, or the chord built on the first note, at the end of a musical phrase. The scientist implies that the dominant stands out as requiring resolution and

thus produces a notable effect for the audience; since the dominant usually does not contain glaring dissonance, however, it evokes anticipation rather than the unease inspired by a suspension. The ambiguity of the speaker's intended audience in this statement – the pattern of previous stanzas suggests that he addresses Galuppi, but the line fits in the context of the imagined concert – creates the possibility that he directs his analysis of the dominant to various people. The expectancy of the dominant's resolution may reflect the 18th-century listeners' assumption that goodness lies ahead, or it could demonstrate the scientist's retrospective gloom in relating his fantasies to the composer. Either way, the chord finds its conclusion in the next line, where the narrator finishes his music theory segment with “So, an octave struck the answer” (25). By indicating that the perfect interval of an octave offers resolution, the narrator alludes to the satisfaction of the 18th-century listeners, looking back on them with the sad knowledge of their eventual death. The octave also closes this section of the speaker's musings, preparing for his contemplation of the past audience's demise and his own inevitable end.

The remainder of the poem contains only one explicit reference to music, and it does not concern a technical term: the narrator echoes his earlier “Here you come with your old music” with the more ominous “In you come with your cold music” (4, 33). In describing the toccata as “cold,” the scientist blames Galuppi for forcing him to confront his fears about death, resuming the personal approach of the opening stanza. He once again addresses his vision of the composer, throwing fabricated quotes back at him in protest: “Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned: / ‘Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned’” (34-35). The use of “cold” also makes a derogatory reference to the compositional style of Galuppi's time. Speaking from his vantage point in the mid-19th century, at the peak of the

emotionally driven Romantic era, the scientist acknowledges the comparative restraint of the Baroque and Classical periods. Essentially dismissing his emotional response to the music that he has just described, the narrator emphasizes this criticism of the methodical style to express his indignation at the morbid thoughts that Galuppi has inspired.

The poem itself flows in a songlike manner that encompasses the musicality of the work. Browning organizes the narrator's reflections into even lines of fifteen syllables, each of which follows the same rhythmic pattern: two unstressed syllables leading into seven trochaic feet. The preface of unstressed syllables resembles a musical anacrusis, also known as a pickup, which occurs when a phrase begins before the first beat of a measure. Similarly, the stanzas resemble verses of a song; the repetitive structure suggests a musical counterpart of strophic form, in which the different words of each verse follow the same music. As a structure primarily intended for vocal music, however, strophic form rarely appears in instrumental pieces such as Galuppi's toccata. Browning's three-line stanzas, meanwhile, stray from the musical convention of grouping phrases in fours, which particularly guided composition in the periods of Galuppi's career. Even in the format of his poem, therefore, Browning sets his character firmly in the 19th century by refusing to emulate the very music he describes. The scientist, despite his admiration and examination of Galuppi's toccata, can neither live in the 18th-century Venice of his imagination nor escape the limitations of the time allotted to him on earth.



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