

Vysloužil, Jiří

**Notes on the poetics and dramaturgy of "The seven words of Christ"
by Heinrich Schütz**

*Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. H, Řada
hudebněvědná. [1988-1989], vol. 37-38, iss. H23-24, pp. [19]-26*

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/112473>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

JIŘÍ VYSLOUŽIL

**NOTES ON THE POETICS AND
DRAMATURGY OF "THE SEVEN WORDS
OF CHRIST" BY HEINRICH SCHÜTZ**

1

The foundations of a modern appreciation of H. Schütz were laid by works of Philipp Spitta, André Pirró, Hermann Kretzschmar, and recently also of Hans Joachim Moser. Some of them have had re-editions, for example Spitta's "musical-historical study" of 1894 Heinrich Schütz, *Leben und Werke* (new edition in 1976) and Moser's monograph *Heinrich Schütz, Leben und Werk*, 1936 (new edition in 1954, English translation in 1959). The new interest in these publications is fully justified since they contain a sum of critically verified findings covering the composer's historical biography and musical analysis of his works. In Moser's extensive monograph of over six hundred pages we also find a musicological account of the Passion oratorio "The Seven Words of Christ" (*Die sieben Worte unsers lieben Erlösers und Seligmachers Jesu Christi so er am Stamm des Heiligen Kreuzes gesprochen — The seven words of our beloved Redeemer and Saviour Jesus Christ as spoken by him on the stake of the fourth word "Eli lama asabathani" and "Mein Gott, warum hast du his high evaluation ("ein Werk höchsten Ranges" — a work of highest rank) by presenting a number of arguments which may be briefly summarized in the following statements:*

a) Unique, though not the only one („einsam, aber nicht ganz allein“) is the subject matter of the work consisting of the "seven words of the Crucified" selected from all the four gospels, which Schütz, like the medieval tradition, treats in the mystical unity of the number seven.

b) The oratorio's story proper, divided into seven numbers, is framed by a motet introduction (Introitus) and conclusion (Conclusio) to the words of the German sacred song "Da Jesus an dem Kreutze stund" (When Jesus stood on the cross), which are separated from the Passion scene proper by instrumental symphonies. Motet elements are also employed in the Evangelist's entrances to the scenes of emphatic climax of the fourth word "Eli lama asabthani" and "Mein Gott, warum hast du

mich verlassen" (My God, why hast thou forsaken me), and in the conclusion to the seventh word „Vater, ich empfehle meinen Geist in deine Hände" (Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit).

c) As for the musical style, "The Seven Words of Christ" is a synthesis of the contrapuntal writing of old motet Passions and the Gabriellian instrumental symphony, the Italian "nuove musiche" (Monteverdian accompanied monodies), figured bass and the musical idiom of the German Protestant hymn.

All these characteristics, like those from the forewords to score editions by E. Stein (1934) and B. Grusnick (1957), retain their validity of objective statements of music history, which even today do not need to be changed in any substantial way. It is only the fourth argument of Moser's that is rather problematic:

d) Under the impression of Kretschmar's earlier works (Führer durch den Konzertsaal II, 1—1895), Moser, highly appreciating the "Seven Words of Christ", directs his attention also to the content qualities of the music, which he sees in the illustrative rendering or depicting of various kinds of feeling and mood suggested by the text (Schütz's music is, as Moser says, "affektschildernd", i.e. affect-depicting). The affect of the fifth word "Mich dürstet" (I thirst) is interpreted by Moser as follows: "Manche dieser Sätzchen sind erschütternd in ihrer Gespanntheit und Qual, so etwa mit der bedrückten Rückwendung nach e moll" (Some of these short segments are strongly stirring in their tension and anguish, as for example with the gloomy return to E minor).

The affect of the sixth word „Es ist vollbracht" (It is accomplished) is explained in Moser's text as follows: „Dann nach der Tränkung Jesu seltsam realistisch und im Rhythmus höchst schütziſch, erst rasch herausgepreſt und dann stockend" (Then, after Jesus had received the drink, especially realistic and most Schütziſian in rhythm, first pressed out hurriedly and then faltered).

2

Thus, according to Moser (and other older authors), the musical poetics of the "Seven Words of Christ" is the musical poetics of affects, and that not so much in terms of the period doctrine of affects (Affektenlehre) of the 17th and 18th centuries as in terms of the historical hermeneutic distance at which the perceiving individual (scholar, performer or listener) identifies his own affects and ideas with the qualities of the music. There is no deeper analytical evidence supporting this view. Moser does not make use of the principle (still valid in the days of Schütz) that the key of mixed E minor and major (eE), predominating in the oratorio "The Seven Words of Christ", should evoke sombre, sad, gloomy and other similar affects and ideas. Keeping to his hermeneutic interpretation of the musical content, he fails to take into account the multi-layered semantic and syntactic character of a musical work, in which the originally only paradigmatic element of the E minor-major asserts itself artistically meaningfully within the framework of the highly organized musical structure.

Only on the broader syntagmatic plane is it possible to understand the expressive turn from E major to E minor in the fifth word „Mich dürstet“. Nevertheless, the focus of tension is in the melodic tune, a layer in which an immediate interpenetration of word and tone takes place. In the asymmetric five-measure tune within the ambit of minor third (f sharp¹ — a¹) there are exposed two minor seconds (g sharp¹ — a¹, f sharp¹ — g¹). These chromatisms are a source of tension between melody and harmony, in which we reveal a diminished (g sharp¹ — c²) and a diminished fifth (d sharp — a). Both intervals occur on the important heavy beat of the measure, which also underlines their expressive function. But even with its “dissonantism and chromaticism”, the fifth word does not depart from the key E minor-major.

A similarly comprehensive approach is necessary in order to understand the expressive function of the key change from E minor to E major in the sixth word „Es ist vollbracht“, which tends to a positive effect. Here too, the key E minor-major is part of a broader syntagmatic whole. It forms the basis for structuring a melodic tune which progresses ascendingly through the notes of the melodic E minor with characteristic „major“ seconds in the second half of the series (b¹ — c sharp² — d sharp² — e²). The melodic segment is harmonized with major chords. Compared with the fifth word the harmony in the sixth word is consonant. In each measure the fluency of the melodic line is interrupted by a rest which consistently falls on the accented beat of the measure. It is only in the last measure of the word that the pregnant masculine cadence is employed which is matched by the authentic cadence on the tonic (the fifth word, on the contrary, ends with the feminine cadence).

3

Our critical remarks and analytical additions were by no means intended to cast doubt on Moser's meritorious work (particularly as far as his stylistic characterization of the “Seven Words of Christ” is concerned). Our endeavour was rather to point out the vagueness and analytical elementariness of the musical hermeneutic method whose limitations required to be overcome by more objective methods.

The so-called doctrine of tone symbols (W. S. Huber, *Tonsprache-Symbolik*, in: *Neue Schütz-Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, Bd. 3, 1956) has put forward a hypothesis of the illustrative symbolism and allegoric character of Schütz's musical motifs. Six genera of “protomotifs” (Urmotive) are proposed to represent the source and quintessence of Schütz's musical “expressiveness”, which is not to be understood as the expressivity of index character. Huber's effort at an objectivity of view comes out of one point. He neglects the role of interval structuring within the melodic tunes (derivatives of the “protomotifs”) and he fails to examine the important harmonic and metric-rhythmic components, to whose significance we have pointed in Section 2. Neither does he take into account the determinations of historically valid aesthetic norms.

A radical turn in the depth and objectivity of insight and comprehension, also in the case of Schütz, takes place only with the discovery and

aesthetic-historical evaluation of the doctrine of figures (Figurenlehre), a 17th and 18th centuries method of employing the so-called figures in text interpretation, treating music as a discipline clearly interrelated, semantically and syntactically, with text (first thoroughly discussed by H. H. Eggebrecht, cf. H. Schütz, *Musicus poeticus*, 1959). The significance of the imagery (symbolic allegory) of musical motifs is not denied (a group of symbolic-allegoric figures, the so-called Hypotyposis, partly coincides with ascending and descending „protomotifs“ of the doctrine of tone symbolism). The novelty of the interpretation, however, rests upon the fact that it is not confined to merely one musical parameter (musical figures are not a matter of melody only), that attention is directed to the totality of a musical work, including the text, which is in this case of fundamental importance to the musical analysis of a composition. The objectivity of exposition is also enhanced by considering the period aesthetic views, upon which the poetic devices of musical works largely depend.

4

In the case of “The Seven Words of Christ” the requirement of text analysis is of special importance also because Schütz compiled and created the text by himself from a selection of verses of all four gospels. His creative literary achievement has not been sufficiently appreciated in musicological literature. On the contrary, there are some tactful mentions to the effect that Schütz did not always respect the original reading of the text, that he sometimes departed from it because, as he himself put it, he relied on his memory when compiling his libretto (Moser l. c., F. Stein in the preface to the edition of Schütz’s works, 1934). Such statement, of course, suppresses the true cause of changes and adaptations, which stemmed from Schütz’s purposeful treatment of the text with respect to the musical dramaturgy of a Passion oratorio, rather than from his memory errors. We will try to support our assertion by offering the following arguments:

a) Schütz selects, shortens, contaminates and extends the gospel verses in order to create out of them a scene which, through its dynamism, contrastness and expressivity, evokes a vision of the Baroque picture of crucifixion. The action proper, framed by a motet introitus, conclusio and symphonies, develops in logically interrelated items (words), their central subject idea being the seven words, or utterances of Christ (in the structuring of the libretto, too, one can find the composition of the crucifixion image projected into the musical form). The forms of expression used in the libretto are partly the commenting monologues of the Evangelist, partly the lapidary dialogues of characters of the story (Jesus, the two criminals), which make the libretto text, ultimately leading to a catharsis, “theatrical” The final solution to the conflict between humanity and divinity is that man dies, but divinity in the man, who is reborn in death through overcoming himself, asserts its triumphant immortality.

The scene of crucifixion in “The Seven Words of Christ” by H. Schütz is his most theatrical and expressive Passion work already by virtue of the text.

b) In structuring the text Schütz is fully aware that it is intended for musical setting. The adaptation and shortening of verses, as well as the insertion of new textual segments, are mostly motivated by semantic-syntactic and dramaturgic considerations.

The simple two-syllable utterance of the Evangelist taken from Matthew's Gospel "das ist" (that is) in the fourth word *Eli lama asabathani* is extended by Schütz to the exegetically more eloquent "das ist verdolmetchet" (it is translated). The text extension, at the same time, creates room for the vocal phrase of the three-measure motet segment with an effective plagal close so that the Hebrew form of the word be more markedly distinguished from the German counterpart.

Schütz substantially alters the soldier's episode narrated by the Evangelist. Apparently, the text from the Gospel according to Matthew did not suit Schütz's intention and idea, therefore he partly shortened it and contaminated with verse fragments taken from John's Gospel, partly added his own text and hereby created an impressive and exciting scene in the spirit of the Baroque representation of crucifixion. For the sake of comparison we will first cite the narratively laconic text according to Matthew and then the imaginatively more expressive variant by Schütz: "Und alsbald lief einer unter ihnen, nahm einen Schwamm und füllte ihn mit Essig und steckte ihn auf ein Rohr und tränkte ihn" (Matthew 27, 48 — And one of them ran at once and fetched a sponge and filled it with vinegar and put it onto a cane and gave him a drink). And Schütz:

"Und einer aus den Kriegesknechten lief bald hin, nahm einen Schwamm und füllet ihn mit Essig und Ysopen und steckte auf ein Rohr und hielt ihn dar zum Munde und tränket ihn. Da nun Jesus den Essig genommen hatte, sprach er:" (And one from the warriors came there soon running, and fetched a sponge and filled it with vinegar and hysop and put it onto a cane, and held it to his lips and gave him a drink. Having taken the vinegar, Jesus said:)¹

Reconstructed in a similar manner is the catharsis of the seventh word "Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände" (Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit), in which the death of Jesus the son is commented upon with a motet-like fourteen-measure musical narrative of the Evangelist: "Und als er das gesagt hatte, neiget er das Haupt und gab seinen Geist auf" (And having said this, he bows his head and gave up his spirit), in which Schütz replaced the emotionally neutral "verschied er" (he passed away) from the Luke Gospel by a much broader euphemistic circumlocution "neiget er . . ."²

c) Schütz's musical sense is also seen in his adaptations concerning the phonic (acoustic) and metric-rhythmic (prosodic) aspects of the libretto.

By repeating characteristic words and word groups Schütz makes his

¹ The excitement, movement and dynamics of the scene are musically expressed by livelier motifs with dotted rhythms and minor-major oscillation of melodies and harmonies (with some characteristic dissonances).

² The textual segment is first set to music by using a type of the descending "protomotif" through the notes $d^2 - c^2 - b^1 - a^1 - g^1 - f \text{ sharp}^1 - e^1 - d \text{ sharp}^1$ and a subsequent ascending "protomotif" through the notes $d^1 - e^1 - f \text{ sharp}^1 - g^1$, in terms of Huber's doctrine of musical symbols.

text rhythmical, and through word and sound parallelisms at the openings of verse segments (with the conjunction 'und' as most frequent) and in their cadences (here by using most often the softly euphonic 'sprach') he endows the biblical prose with poetic qualities, thus delivering it from the lack of metrical and rhythmical organization.

Instead of the livelier dactyls the altered text has the more tranquil and more tuneful spondees, right in the opening of the first narrative of the Evangelist, whose text he contaminates from verses of Mark's and Luke's Gospels, thus:

"Und es war um die dritte Stunde, da sie *ihn* kreuzigten" (And it was the third hour when they crucified him) [Mark 15, 25]; "Jesus aber sprach . . ." (But Jesus said . . .) [Luke 23, 34], contaminated, give:

"Und es war um die dritte Stunde, da sie *Jesum* kreuzigten, *er* aber sprach." Thus, apart from the prosodic adaptation, Schütz's version also shows the semantically motivated replacement of the impersonal 'ihn' by the personal 'Jesum' intended to be heard in the very first place.

The scope of the present study does not permit to analyze more characteristic features of Schütz's prosodically, semantically and dramatically well-designed libretto, whose conception consistently observes the unity of style and which is an achievement of a "musicus poeticus" who was able, thanks to his unusual abilities of imagination and expression, to see and experience empathically the tragic allegories of the Baroque world. That Schütz's disposition and devotion of that kind determined the textual composition of the scene is beyond any doubt on purely ideological grounds. His personal engagement is also evidenced by his way of handling the liturgical biblical text.

5

The high standards of the poetics and dramaturgy of Schütz's libretto of "The Seven Words of Christ" make us return to questions of musical style, content and creativity. How did Schütz the "musicus poeticus" fill his role as the composer of his work?

If we looked for an answer to this question while relying only on the "doctrine of musical symbols", or if we wanted to content ourselves with the analytically elementary arguments of hermeneutics, we would hardly be successful. Neither can we learn the full truth when considering the external signs of style.

In fact, the essential orientation on the modern style of the dramatic Monteverdian monody had in the "Seven Words of Christ" not only a purely formal significance. It opened the way to a new, immensely lifelike ("truthful") type of musical writing, distinct from the strict (objective) contrapuntal structure of older motets. The modern monodial style allowed the music immediately to respond to the prosody, word meaning and dramaturgy. Motet numbers (Introitus, Conclusio) and fragments and symphonies only serve as a "framework" of the story proper of the oratorio. In the sung monologues and dialogues (occasionally Schütz lets them be "recited" only) the objective motet style is abandoned. The subjectively experienced action is musically rendered into loose quasi-prosaic forms of ex-

pression, in which music becomes a sort of "speech", and that not only in regard to its direct connection with the phonic (prosodic and intonational) pattern of the word, but also in regard to the expression of concrete affects.

We can now come back to the musical commentary on, and analysis of the fifth and sixth words from Section 2. It follows from a comparison of the music of the two words that different contents and affects suggested by the text are expressed by means of different musical devices. The musical material of the fifth word is chromatic, while that of the sixth word is rather diatonic. Whereas the music of the fifth word shows a tendency to dissonant forms, the music of the sixth word tends to consonant forms. Eloquent in terms of content are also the changes from major to minor keys (and vice versa) within the framework of the mixed E minor-major. The musical "realism" of the sixth word containing the "rapidly pressed out" and "faltered" utterances has already been pointed out by Moser. It contrasts with the melismatic character of the plaintive expression of the fifth word, Schütz's art and concretization of expressive differentiation is not unrestrained, neither is it a product of pure musical immanence. It is heteronomous in the sense of the Baroque musical poetics and its expressive "realism". Musical-historical analysis and comparison safeguard us from the subjectivity of the historical hermeneutic distance. More objective arguments are offered by the doctrine of figures, in whose command Schütz proved to be a master and which he creatively exploited in his works.

To demonstrate its presence in Schütz's work we will adduce the following examples of musical-rhetorical figures:

a) The allegoric anábasis (ascénsus), an ascending scale figure, as a sign of a positive affect (the Son the Redeemer, who fulfilled his mission on Earth, turns after sufferings his relieved mind to the heaven).

b) The silence (rest) figure *suspirátio*, which rhythmically objectifies the affects of sigh, weariness, suffering of the Son of man (an interpretation corresponding to Moser's insight).

c) The emphatic figure *epízeuxis*, which is to intensify gradually the affective excitement by repeating and shifting words and music.

d) The fifth word includes the characteristic chromatic semitones. According to the doctrine of figures this figure is of the pathopoeia type, whose function is to express a negative affect, an exciting expressivity. Both dissonances of the vertical lines (diminished fourth g sharp¹ — a^1 and diminished fifth d sharp — a) were regarded in the doctrine of figures as deficient intervals (from Latin *deficere* = fall off, lack, slacken). We cannot imagine that these intervals should have crept into the fifth word inadvertently (the meaning attributed to deficient interval figures by the doctrine corresponds with the affects of the text and scene).

6

The few examples above should suffice to demonstrate the role of the doctrine of figures in Schütz's musical poetics. They demonstrate the content side of Schütz's musical creativity, whose main aim was to "convey

a text by music" and to heighten its appeal by means of expression and dramaturgy. In his fundamental monograph on Schütz H. Eggenbrecht has presented Schütz as a composer firmly grounded in the doctrine of figures was, even in the instance of Schütz, not an end but a means of artistic communication. In the "Seven Words of Christ" it was adapted to specific dramaturgic intentions and ideas, for the realization of which Schütz created the necessary conditions already in his libretto.³

Translated by Ladislav Peterka

K POETICE A DRAMATURGII „SEDMI SLOV KRISTOVÝCH“ H. SCHÜTZE

Heinrich Schütz (1585—1672) je čítán k prvním velikánům německé hudby. Charakterem a tematikou své tvorby je ve skutečnosti předchůdcem J. S. Bacha, který se narodil shodou okolností o sto let později, stejně jako G. F. Händel (1685). Dílo skladatelské trojice se těší velké péči v Německé demokratické republice, jež znovu vyvrcholila v roce 1985 řadou tematických hudebních festivalů a muzikologických sympozií. Studie o Schützově oratoriu „Sedm slov Kristových“ vznikla pro tuto příležitost.

Pojednává o skladbě, jež je čítána k vrcholům Schützovy tvorby, ale kolem jejíhož vzniku a umělecké podstaty zůstalo několik neujasněných otázek. Hned první se týká textu (libreta) sestaveného z fragmentů německého překladu Lutherova, totiž z jeho přetlumočení evangelií Jana, Lukáše a Matouše. V libretu zůstaly odchylky od originálu. Z toho usoudila schützovská literatura, že Schütz sestavil text po paměti a že se tím bezděčně odchýlil na mnoha místech od předlohy. Pravdou však je, že Schütz ve výběru, krácení, kontaminování a rozšiřování převzatých textových segmentů postupoval cílevědomě a s jasnou tvůrčí představou. Ve svém libretu uplatnil hlediska prozodická (s ohledem na možnosti hudby), dramatická a významová (s ohledem na ideu vytvořit komorní oratorní drama). Ruku v ruce se sestavením textu postupoval i při jeho zhudebnění.

Dosavadní literatura si povšimla expresivity hudby „Sedmi slov Kristových“. V souladu s poplatností starším analytickým metodám (hudební hermeneutice) ztožnila obsahový charakter Schützovy hudby s vlastním prožíváním tzv. hudebních afektů. Opomenuty byly přitom objektivní předpoklady výrazovosti zakotvené přímo v objektu hudební struktury. H. Schütz však mnohem hlouběji hudebně vykládal smysl svého textu (explicatio textus) v duchu barokní estetiky o tzv. rétorických figurách. Přihlédnutím k této estetice a využitím některých momentů semiotiky mohl autor studie dospět k závěru, že Schütz pojal své oratorium „Sedm slov Kristových“ jako scénickou duchovní skladbu, jejíž výraz a forma stavějí na principu rétorických (hudebních) figur a na dramaturgicky divadelně koncipovaném libretu.

Dramatičnost se „Sedm slov Kristových“ odlišuje od ostatního díla Schützova. H. Schütz je považován za autora první německé opery „Daphné“, provedené v r. 1627. Její hudba se však nedochovala, a tak „Sedm slov Kristových“ podává ojedinělý důkaz o dramatických ambicích Schützových z doby, kdy německá opera ještě neexistovala.

³ B. Grunswick, in his afterword to the Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke, Bd. 2, 1957, concedes dramatic moments in "The Seven Words of Christ" with reservations only, hence our views are disunited.