

Felix F. Diergarten*

“At times even Homer nods off” : Heinrich Christoph Koch’s Polemic against Joseph Haydn*

KEYWORDS: Koch, Haydn, Sulzer, Batteux, instrumental music, absolute music, “Il distratto,” humor, wit, historically informed analysis

ABSTRACT: A symphony of Haydn is the subject of criticism in a polemic by Heinrich Christoph Koch that has received no attention to date. Haydn’s name is not actually mentioned, but it can be demonstrated from the context that the reference is to Haydn’s Symphony No. 60 (“Il distratto”). This insight forces both a re-evaluation of Koch’s relationship with the work of Haydn in the context of contemporary musical aesthetics and a debate on the methodology of “historically informed” analysis.

Received December 2007

I. Exordium

[1] The writings of Heinrich Christoph Koch have been a fixture of music theory literature since the 1970s. In Germany it was Carl Dahlhaus and Wolfgang Budday and in the English-speaking world it was primarily Leonard G. Ratner, Nancy K. Baker and Elaine Sisman who awakened the interest in Koch.⁽¹⁾ This interest centered around the concept of “punctuation form” that is expressed in Koch’s work and that offered an alternative to the 19th century’s thematic concept of form, which was viewed with growing skepticism. The idea that musical form is articulated through a sequence of cadences and caesuras, like the punctuation of an oration, is a fixture in the theoretical and aesthetic literature of the 18th century that can be found in nearly every compositional treatise of the time.⁽²⁾ In this respect, Koch’s treatise *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Komposition*⁽³⁾ is completely in line with the theoretical and educational tradition of its time. Both the thoroughness of Koch’s presentation and the

fact that Koch repeatedly illustrated the concept of punctuation through the compositions of Joseph Haydn earned Koch's *Versuch* a special status as a basis for "historically informed" analyses of the works of Haydn and other composers of the 18th century. This re-evaluation of Koch's theory opened up many new perspectives on the music of the 18th century, some of which have not yet been fully explored to this day. But it is imperative with any analytical method to reflect on the appropriateness and relevance of the results it yields. This question as it pertains to Koch and Haydn is not answered merely by the fact that they were contemporaries.

[2] Koch spent nearly his entire life in and around Rudolstadt, a small, central German court: His awareness of musical developments in the European capitals in the latter half of the 18th century was limited and belated. A contemporary of Koch already highlighted this problematic aspect in a review of the *Versuch*: "We only regret that Mr. K. lives in a place where he perhaps seldom has the opportunity to see new and unusual pieces and even more seldom has the opportunity to hear good music and masterpieces."⁽⁴⁾ Koch was not isolated from the continuous expansion and gradual acceptance of the works of Austrian composers in northern and central Germany during the last third of the 18th century, but the fundamental paradigm of his writings is the musical style of his environment, especially composers from Halle, Gotha, Dresden and Berlin such as Hiller, Hasse, Benda and Graun.⁽⁵⁾ The claim that "Koch offers us a way of discussing Classical Forms entirely in accordance with the compositional practice of the time"⁽⁶⁾ and the comment that Koch's writings "closely followed practice"⁽⁷⁾ and are "grounded in the repertory of the day,"⁽⁸⁾ though not incorrect, must be differentiated according to the *non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous* when applied to Haydn.⁽⁹⁾ The "compositional practice of the time" and the "repertory of the day" in Koch's environment were simply not "entirely in accordance" with the "compositional practice" and "repertory of the day" in Haydn's environment. Further differences stem from the fact that even the most recent Haydn example cited by Koch in his *Versuch* was over 20 years old. This time lag is significant given the rapid pace at which Viennese music developed between 1760 and 1800. The fact that Koch's compositional treatise was intended for beginners presents a further difficulty, as his theory and musical examples are selected and

prepared for their educational and systematic aspects. Another problem is Koch's core attitude of conservatism, which is particularly evident in his polemic essay "Ueber den Modegeschmack in der Tonkunst"⁽¹⁰⁾ but is expressed in many parts of the *Versuch* as well. Seen in the context of his immediate environment, Koch may well have been entirely representative of many aspects of contemporary common practice. But when compared to the parallel compositional developments of the "First Viennese Modernism,"⁽¹¹⁾ the neoclassical musical aesthetics revealed in the writings of Koch, though they may have survived longer in Koch's central German environment than in Vienna, were already subject to intense criticism even there. The underlying aesthetic principles of Koch's writings had been abstracted from poetry and painting and applied to music by authors such as Batteux or Sulzer. These principles had only very little to do with the type of music regularly encountered by many people of the day.⁽¹²⁾

[3] This difference between aesthetic theory and compositional practice is especially evident in the fact that traditional aesthetics (and Koch's writing) up to the end of the 19th century remained focused on the paradigm of vocal music, while in areas such as Vienna with a strong Italian influence an aesthetic interest in instrumental music took hold early on. One way in which this focus on vocal music can be seen in Koch's work is that, although various instrumental genres are illustrated in his treatise, they rarely move away from the paradigm of the aria and ritornello forms. The instrumental genres in the Viennese compositional practice, by contrast, had been distancing themselves from this paradigm since the 1760s. In the third volume of the *Versuch*, it is noteworthy that the recitative, aria, duet and chorus are discussed first, prior to the overture and symphony, which are included among the "opening or preparatory pieces."⁽¹³⁾ The primacy of vocal music is also made explicit in Koch's *Lexikon*, where as late as 1802 he expresses his view of instrumental music as an "imitation of vocal music" and claims "that vocal music has very apparent and undeniable advantages" over purely instrumental music.⁽¹⁴⁾ The pre-eminence of vocal music in the view of Koch and many fellow theorists of his time can be explained by the loyalty to neoclassical and rhetorical musical concepts, even as the metaphors of these concepts became harder and harder to reconcile with modern compositional practice in the course of the 18th century. A contemporary of Koch wrote, for

example, that one hallmark of Haydn's music was its very *lack* of adherence to the rigid rules of rhetoric.⁽¹⁵⁾

II. Narratio

[4] The differences between Koch's theoretical premises and the compositional practice of the "First Viennese Modernism" are especially clear at the beginning of the second volume of the *Versuch*, where Koch describes "the inner nature of music" (*die innere Beschaffenheit der Tonstücke*). In contrast to the "external nature of music," which involves the "mechanical rules of composition" or compositional technique in the stricter sense, here Koch is developing the aesthetic backdrop of the *Versuch*. And here it is that he writes a polemic against one of Joseph Haydn's symphonies. This polemic has remained undiscovered up until now, as Haydn's name is not mentioned. But it can be clearly demonstrated from the context that Haydn is the one who is meant:⁽¹⁶⁾

Der zweyte Abweg, für
welchen ich euch warnen
will, besteht in einem der
Absicht der Tonkunst
schädlichen Witze. „Den
Anfang zum Verfall der
schönen Künste“ (sagt
Batteux) „haben allemal die
Leute gemacht, welche man
witzige Köpfe nennt. Sie
haben den Künsten mehr
Schaden gethan, als die
Gothen, die nur vollführten,
was ein Plinius, ein Seneca
und ihre Nachahmer
angefangen hatten—Das
Beispiel des Witzes ist
blendend, und desto
ansteckender, je leichter es
vielleicht nachzuahmen
ist. “

Sehet da einen Wink, den sich

The second fallacy of which
I intend to warn you
consists in a wittiness
detrimental to the purpose
of music. “People who are
called witty have always
started the decline of the
fine arts,” says Batteux.
“They have done more harm
to the arts than the Goths,
who only carried out what a
Pliny, a Seneca and their
imitators had
begun.—Wittiness is
dazzling, and the easier to
imitate, the more
contagious it is.

Therefore, beginning

angehende Componisten besonders zu Nutze machen müssen, weil dieses Uebel sich auch in die Tonkunst einzuschleichen versucht hat. Es ist dieses auf zweyerley Art geschehen. Einmal hat man gesucht charakteristische Tonstücke einzuführen, deren Charakteristisches nicht Empfindung, sondern Spielwerk für den Verstand ist.

Was thut der Componist, der z. B. durch ein Instrumentalstück den Zerstreuten vorstellt? Das Charakteristische seines Tonstücks besteht in etwas äusserlichen; er verbindet Theile zusammen, die eigentlich nicht zusammen gehören; er macht einen ungeraden Rhythmus wo wir einen geraden vermuten, er verwechselt die weiche Tonart ohne Ursache mit der harten, u. s. w.

Darinne besteht also das Charakteristische solcher Tonstücke. Wird nun vielleicht (weil der Componist auf keine Empfindung dabey auszugehen scheint) doch wenigstens durch ein solches Stück der Geist der Zuhörer beschäftigt, wird er vielleicht das Vergnügen haben, zu errathen, was der Componist hat vorstellen

composers in particular must take this hint, as that malpractice has tried to wangle its way into the world of music. This happened in two ways. On the one hand, people wrote compositions filled not with feeling, but with playful entertainment [*Spielwerk*] for the intellect.

How, for example, does the composer represent an absent-minded person [*den Zerstreuten*] in an instrumental piece? The distinguishing traits of his composition are extrinsic; he connects sections which properly do not belong together; he makes a triple rhythm where we expect a duple; without reason he alternates the minor mode with the major, and so on.

These aspects embody the essence of such compositions. Now (since the composer does not appear to aim at any feeling) will the spirit of the listener be engaged by such a piece, will he perhaps delight in guessing what the composer has wished to represent? No, listeners will never be able to do this; thus one

wollen? Nein, dieses werden die Zuhörer niemals im Stande seyn; daher sucht man es ihnen dadurch im voraus bekannt zu machen, daß man das Charakteristische eines solchen Tonstücks auf den Umschlag und über die Stimmen schreibt. Auf diese Art malt man in der Tonkunst Hypochondristen und Singuhren, Donnerwetter und verliebte Zänkereyen u. d. gl.

Anstatt also mit der Kunst auf das Herz zu würken, sucht man den Verstand der Zuhörer mit Witz zu beschäftigen. Das Lustigste bey der ganzen Sache ist noch dieses, daß viele solcher charakteristischer Tonstücke als bloßes Ideal des Componisten, das ist, so lange man nicht weiß, daß sie charakteristisch seyn sollen, gefallen, und nur alsdenn erst missfallen, wenn man sie aus der Absicht hört, aus welcher sie eigentlich gehört werden sollen.

Jedoch diese Art des Witzes ist in der Tonkunst noch nicht so allgemein, daß man großen Nachtheil für die Kunst dabey zu besorgen hätte. Nur dieses muß man dabey bedauern, daß auch zuweilen Homere schlafen.

Weit gefährlicher aber und weit nachtheiliger ist es

tries to make the defining characteristics of such a composition known to them in advance by writing them on the cover and over the parts. In this way, music can paint hypochondriacs and music boxes, thunderstorms and lovers' quarrels, and so forth.

Thus instead of having an effect on the heart through art, the intellect of the listener is engaged through wit. The most amusing aspect of this subject is that many such compositions please simply as abstract music [*Ideal des Componisten*], that is, as long as their pictorial nature is unknown, and only displease when heard for their intended purpose.

This type of wit in music, however, is as yet not sufficiently widespread as to threaten great damage to the art. Only it is regrettable that at times even Homer nods off.

But far more dangerous and far more damaging it is for

für die Kunst, wenn man sie den Harlekin machen lässt. Dieses Uebel hat seit einiger Zeit angefangen ansteckend zu werden. Diejenigen, die in diesen Fehler fallen, wissen keinen Unterschied unter dem Comischen und dem Pöbelhaften zu machen. Sie begehen eben den Fehler, dessen sich derjenige schuldig macht, der bey einer Gesellschaft edel denkender Menschen den Zotenreißer macht.

Die Ursache dieses Uebels ist wieder der Durst nach dem Beyfalle des größten Haufens. Man fühlt, daß man mit dem Aechten der Tonkunst diesen Durst nicht stillen kann; selbst damit will es nicht mehr recht fort, daß man ausserordentliche Schwierigkeiten zeigt, und daher wendet man die erlangte Fertigkeit darzu an, Lachen zu erregen, um auf diesem Wege seine Absicht zu erreichen.

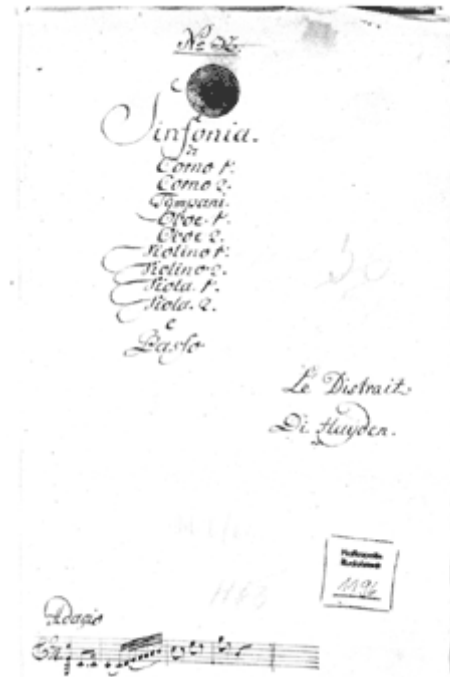
[5] To what extent can this polemic against “wittiness” be applied to Haydn? The works of Haydn were associated with labels such as “wit,” “humor” and “caprice” from the beginning, as Gretchen A. Wheelock has documented extensively.⁽¹⁷⁾ Moreover, Koch’s

art when it is allowed to become clownery. For some time this evil has begun to be contagious. Those who make this mistake do not know how to differentiate between the comic and the vulgar. They commit a fault comparable to telling a dirty joke to a gathering of intellectuals.

Again, the reason for this evil is the desire to gain the approval of the masses. It appears that this thirst cannot be quenched with respect for music; even extraordinary difficulties no longer help, and thus the acquired skill is applied toward provoking laughter in order to reach one’s goal.

Figure 1. Hofkapelle Rudolstadt
(Notenbestand), Nr. 1196

closing remark that “at times even Homer nods off” (a paraphrase of Horace’s *bonus dormitat Homerus*) indicates that the reference must be to an important, recognized and renowned composer—a status Haydn had long enjoyed by the 1780s. The critical clue, however, is Koch’s reference to an “instrumental piece” that portrays “an absent-minded” person (*den Zerstreuten*): In 1774, Haydn had written incidental music to Regnard’s play *Le distrait*, which was performed in German under the title *Der Zerstreute*. Haydn compiled this incidental music into his Symphony No. 60, which gained popularity throughout Europe and whose nickname *Il distratto* can be found already in contemporary copies.⁽¹⁸⁾ No other work bearing that name is known, whereas Haydn’s *Distratto* can be found in over twenty copies throughout Europe. One of these copies, bearing the inscription *Le distrait*, is in the court archives of Rudolstadt, where Koch spent his entire career (cf. figure 1). The absence of any other work of the same name and



(click to enlarge)

the existence of a contemporary copy in Rudolstadt provide ample proof that the instrumental piece mentioned by Koch as portraying “den Zerstreuten” could only be the Symphony No. 60 of Joseph Haydn.

[6] The compositional phenomena mentioned by Koch are also found in Haydn’s work: Koch’s remark that the composer “connects sections which properly do not belong together” refers to the characteristic juxtaposed thematic segments, the “clash of styles”⁽¹⁹⁾ in this symphony (cf. figure 2–4). This topical flexibility, which is typical for the Viennese instrumental style beginning in the 1770s, contradicts Koch’s opinion “that the various sentiments can not be juxtaposed in instrumental music the way they are when poetry and musical composition are united.”⁽²⁰⁾ Koch’s remark that “he makes a triple rhythm where we expect a duple” refers to the alternation of odd-numbered and even-numbered groups of measures that is a hallmark of Haydn’s style.⁽²¹⁾ Koch’s criticism that “without reason he alternates the minor mode

Figure 2. Haydn, Symphony No. 60, beginning of 2nd movement; juxtaposition of *cantabile*-topic and *fanfare*-topic

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the 2nd movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 60. The score is in 3/4 time and marked 'Andante'. It features six staves: 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinet in G, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello e Bassi. The Oboe and Clarinet parts play a fanfare-like melody starting in the third measure, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The Violin and Viola parts play a more lyrical, cantabile melody starting in the first measure, marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The Viola and Violoncello e Bassi parts play a bass line that supports the cantabile melody.

(click to enlarge)

with the major” refers to the numerous changes between major and minor within the symphony, especially the prominent change to major at the end of the fourth movement. Elsewhere in the *Versuch*, however, Koch justifies these very major/minor changes.⁽²²⁾ Koch is thus merely arguing that Haydn’s change is “without reason.” An appropriate reason in Koch’s view would have been an underlying text, as I will demonstrate later.

Figure 3. Beginning of 1st movement;
juxtaposition of *French*
ouverture-topic and *cantabile*-topic



(click to enlarge)

Figure 4. 1st movement, measures
107–111;
juxtaposition of *bustling*-topic and
Sturm und Drang-topic (quotation
“Farewell” Symphony)



(click to enlarge)

[7] It would be oversimplifying to interpret Koch’s polemic as merely against the *simphonies à programmes*. Koch, like nearly all his contemporaries, held tone

painting in contempt as “against good taste.”⁽²³⁾ Koch’s attitude toward the *simphonies à programmes*, however, though hesitant, is not generally dismissive.⁽²⁴⁾ The context makes it clear that Haydn’s *Distratto* goes against Koch’s aesthetic principles in a more general sense. Koch’s polemic faces the problems that confronted the traditional aesthetics in the 18th century through the emergence of wordless instrumental music.⁽²⁵⁾ Koch begins his polemic with the claim that Haydn’s symphony is “filled not with sentiment, but with entertainment for the intellect.” To understand why Haydn’s *Distratto* is a composition without “sentiment,” it is necessary to look more closely at Koch’s concept of “sentiment” (*Empfindung*).⁽²⁶⁾

III. Argumentatio

[8] Koch borrows his aesthetic viewpoints almost without exception from *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* by Swiss philosopher Johann Georg Sulzer.⁽²⁷⁾ Koch also refers to Charles Batteux’s treatise *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe*, which was the primary channel by which the ideas of French neoclassicism were spread to Germany and which Koch studied in the German translation by Karl Wilhelm Ramler.⁽²⁸⁾ With Koch’s writings, just as with the writings of most of his contemporaries, it is not possible to speak of a consistent, underlying aesthetic system. The many citations from Sulzer’s encyclopedia demonstrate, however, that it must be regarded as the most important among the various influences. But Sulzer’s encyclopedia is itself the product of a great diversity of influences and traditions, some of which contradict each other to some degree, not least because various authors contributed to the encyclopedia. Yet these various traditions do agree overwhelmingly on one point: The central axiom of the musical aesthetics of the 18th century was the idea that music imitates “human passions” and “sentiments.” This argument made it possible to integrate music into a system of fine arts based on the Aristotelian principle of *mimesis*. “Even where everything is attributed to the imitation of nature,” writes Koch, “the art of composition is given over wholly to sentiment. Composition is, among the fine arts, that which expresses sentiments through the combination of sounds.”⁽²⁹⁾ But just because music should express sentiments does not mean that a composer should present *his emotions*, according to this tradition. First of all, expression is not the same as self-expression: Strictly speaking, when Sulzer and

Batteux refer to the “expression of sentiments,” they mean the *imitation* of the expression of sentiments. Second, sentiment (*Empfindung*) is not the same thing as emotion (*Gefühl*). Sulzer’s encyclopedia provides two definitions for the word *Empfindung*. The first definition is inspired by sensualism and interprets *Empfindung* as the opposite of *Erkenntnis* (cognition/knowledge). *Empfindung* in this sense is usually translated as “perception.” Sulzer defines *Erkenntnis* as concerning an object, something that is external from us; with *Empfindung*, however, “we are concerned less with an object’s character and more with whether it makes a good or bad impression upon us.”⁽³⁰⁾ The second definition shows the influence of the Enlightenment and moral philosophy. *Empfindung* here amounts to “being sentient,” and Sulzer uses *Empfindung* in this second sense as a synonym for *Gesinnung* (attitude): “A feeling that through constant repetition and reinforcement becomes the cause of certain inner or external actions.”⁽³¹⁾ It is the role of music to awaken *Empfindung* in the first sense and thereby create and maintain *Empfindung* in the second sense.

[9] This produces a dual role for music that is a central theme throughout neoclassical musical aesthetics: the demand for both intelligibility and coherence of content. To fulfill its moral purpose, an *Empfindung* must be *bestimmt*, which can be translated as “specific,” “defined,” “distinct” or “definite,” and which follows the tradition of ideas such as *Deutlichkeit* (distinctiveness) and *Klarheit* (clarity) that were so important in the theory of art and cognition in German Enlightenment. “Every composition,” writes Sulzer, “whether it is vocal or instrumental, should possess a definite character and be able to arouse specific sentiments in the minds of listeners.”⁽³²⁾ But since the sentiments expressed in music are indefinite, music needs a text to provide it with definiteness. Heinrich Christoph Koch adhered to this tradition as well, writing that music is “not capable of making known to us the reasons why this or that sentiment is aroused, why we are led from one sentiment to the other. ... But the case is altogether different if music is combined with poetry or dance. Poetry not only precisely defines [*bestimmt*] those sentiments whose expressions are similar to one another and protects the composer from being misunderstood, but it also makes known the reasons [*Ursachen*] why particular sentiments are aroused, why we are led from one sentiment

to the other.”⁽³³⁾ Here we are able to understand the passage from Koch’s criticism of Haydn’s *Distratto* in which Koch remarks that the composer changes keys “without reason [*Ursache*]”: The only reason, according to Koch and Sulzer, would be an explanatory text. Sulzer and Koch do concede (as did Batteux) that music is “the most sensual of the arts,” can express sentiments even without words and can even express sentiments more strongly than all the other arts. The indefiniteness of these sentiments is not only morally worthless, however, but can even be uncontrollable and threatening.⁽³⁴⁾ This morally motivated concept of “definiteness of sentiment” is the reason why Koch, Sulzer and other authors of the 18th century held a fundamental preference for vocal music over instrumental music.

[10] Back to Koch’s polemic against Haydn’s *Distratto*: It is possible to understand the polemic within the context of the idea of *Empfindung* as outlined above, since Koch regarded any wordless instrumental music without a “definite” sentiment to be generally problematic. In his polemic against Haydn’s *Distratto*, however, Koch undermines his own convictions when he writes that “characteristic symphonies” can only be appreciated as long as the program is unknown and the musical content therefore remains undetermined. On the one hand, the general sentiments in music should be definite, while on the other hand, characteristic symphonies only find favor if their content remains indefinite. Here we have the predicament encountered by the argumentation of enlightened aesthetics in the transitional period of the late 18th century: Music was no longer allowed to portray specific objects but not yet supposed to portray indefinite feelings. But if the indefiniteness in Haydn’s *Distratto* was not a particular problem for Koch, what provoked his criticism?

[11] In addition to the concept of “definiteness of sentiment,” the traditional aesthetics of the 18th century also include the idea of “unity of sentiment.” The reason for this idea (according to Sulzer) is, that it is the role of a work of art not only to awaken a sentiment but to maintain it continuously. This idea is made clear again and again in Koch’s writing when he consistently uses the singular in referring to *the* sentiment of a composition. Sulzer’s encyclopedia says that the composer should “be on guard against mixing any musical period or figure that is inconsistent with the character of

his piece.”⁽³⁵⁾ In Koch’s view, it even violates the principle of “unity of sentiment” if each movement of a symphony portrays a different sentiment.⁽³⁶⁾ Even the idea of *Mannigfaltigkeit* (variety) is subordinate to this concept, for Sulzer defines variety as “the constantly varied effects of the same cause.”⁽³⁷⁾ “Variety” in this sense serves only to “maintain” the *one* sentiment of a work.⁽³⁸⁾ This is an ideal that many theorists saw realized in the arias of *opera seria* and in French character pieces.

[12] The ideas of “definiteness” and “unity of sentiment” are also related. This is demonstrated by the remarks of Koch cited earlier “that the various sentiments can not be juxtaposed in instrumental music the way they are when poetry and musical composition are united.”⁽³⁹⁾ Whereas an underlying text can make comprehensible a structure rich in contrasts, wordless instrumental music relies completely on the unity of sentiment. Not only does Haydn’s *Distratto* lack this unity, the piece is based on the systematic and continual breach of such unity. The juxtaposition of varying styles and gestures—even within the most narrow context of, say, a single theme—is one of the most characteristic attributes of the Italian-influenced instrumental music of the 18th century. This is especially true of Viennese instrumental music starting in the 1770s. Not only Sulzer and Koch but many other critics of the modern Italian-influenced instrumental music came out against this “short-range topical flexibility”⁽⁴⁰⁾ that enjoys particular prominence in Haydn’s *Distratto* (cf. figure 2–4). To Koch, this flexibility stood in such contrast to his concept of *Empfindung* that he could see no sentiment whatsoever in *Il distratto*, only “wit.” Koch does not describe exactly what he means by “wit.” At the beginning of Koch’s polemic, however, there is a quotation from Batteux’s *Les beaux-arts* in which Batteux polemicizes against “witty people,” by which he means artists who do not share his ideal of the imitation of nature.⁽⁴¹⁾ This notion of wit incorporates the distinction common in the 18th century between “wit” and “humor” and the related association of wit with the artful and humor with the natural, by which wit is understood as “an intellectual ornament, ‘inanimate’ and often sharply pointed as criticism.”⁽⁴²⁾ This concept of wit is found in Sulzer as well, though with Sulzer it has a moral framework. Sulzer writes that wit “delights in that which the reflective mind would consider harmful. It is therefore not uncommon that we find predominantly witty people to have little heart—that is, little

of the tender sentiments that are otherwise common.”⁽⁴³⁾ Sulzer is not essentially hostile to the idea of wit, however. He stresses that “wit is one of the basic elements of the genius that art requires.” What’s key here is the dosage, however, and for Sulzer that means a sparing use of wit. “Too much wit tires and depresses the forces that nourish the spirit and heart, making what should be useful merely pleasant.”

[13] Other musical aesthetics of the time, especially in writings by younger authors, conjure up a positive concept of *Witz*: Christian Friedrich Michaelis, in his 1807 work *Ueber das Humoristische oder Launige in der musikalischen Komposition*, uses the terms *witzig* (witty), *humoristisch* (humorous) and *launig* (capricious) synonymously. “Witty” music for him was characterized by the “unusual combination of thoughts,” the juxtaposition of different topics and styles, as is the case in *Il distratto*: “The departure from convention, the unusual combination of the strange and remote ... at first presents the appearance of inconsistency. But since this ... immediately ceases to be inconsistent in the greater context, this music conveys the impression of comedy and can make one laugh.” Here we see an understanding of “wit” that is found among authors of the early Enlightenment in Germany. They saw *Witz* as the capacity to find unexpected similarities between seemingly dissimilar things or ideas. Michaelis goes on to write that the “most recent music” is “largely humorous, especially since Joseph Haydn, the greatest master of this genre, set the tone so exquisitely in his original symphonies and quartets.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ So while Koch criticizes Haydn for “linking things that don’t belong together,” Michaelis sees this as particular evidence of Haydn’s originality. Early opinions of Haydn and general opinions of the new contrast-dominated Italian style of instrumental music were divided along the same line that clearly separates the assessments of Koch and Michaelis. Whereas the juxtaposition of the heterogeneous was perceived as a violation of classicistic rules by the one group, the other group saw it as (Haydn’s) great quality. Sulzer warned against the “annihilating” effect of wit, while other critics considered it to be a positive attribute, that (as Mark Evan Bonds has argued) “intensifies the aesthetic experience by drawing attention to the very act of perception itself.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ These “witty” techniques were perceived (according to Bonds) “to undermine the traditional premise of aesthetic illusion, thereby creating a sense of ironic distance between the work and

the listener.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ Koch’s remark that Haydn’s *Distratto* is “playful entertainment” is also noteworthy in this regard: The shift in the meaning of the term *Spiel* (play) illustrates the central changes in the aesthetics around 1800. The term has a negative connotation in the classical aesthetics that characterize Koch’s writings, as Koch’s remark on *Il distratto* show. Sulzer also writes (and Koch quotes this verbatim) that a composition that does not stimulate any sentiments is “only playful entertainment.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ The apologists of autonomous instrumental music, however, turned the term *Spiel* into something positive, referring to how the term was used not only in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* but in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Ludwig Tieck wrote in 1797 that instrumental music “fantasizes playfully,”⁽⁴⁸⁾ and Christian Friedrich Michaelis wrote in 1800 that instrumental music grants “the imagination lighter and less inhibited playfulness than if it has been fixated on definite thoughts.”⁽⁴⁹⁾ Hans Georg Nägeli in 1826 cites “playing with forms” as the essential attribute of instrumental music, writing that “the more playful a musical composition is ... the more successful it is,”⁽⁵⁰⁾ and Eduard Hanslick, writing in the mid 19th century, compared music with a kaleidoscope in whose “play with colors and forms” one could take pleasure.⁽⁵¹⁾ The terms *Witz* and *Spiel*, which Koch uses referring to *Il Distratto*, illustrate how the apologists of an autonomous and wordless instrumental music took up the ideas of traditional 18th-century aesthetics, transformed them (even turned them into their opposites) and used this “romantic transformation of enlightened themes” (Hosler) to define their new vision of music.

IV. Confutatio

[14] Koch’s polemic against Haydn’s *Distratto* bears a certain contradiction to a passage from the third volume of the *Versuch*, which was published six years later. There, Koch quotes the description of the symphony from Sulzer’s encyclopedia, which was probably written by J.A.P. Schulz, in which the symphony is called a “sublime Pindaric ode”: A symphony is described here as showing “profound and keen ideas” and “sudden modulations and digressions from one key to another that are all the more striking the more distant their relation, strong gradations of loud and soft.”⁽⁵²⁾ It is interesting to observe how Koch omits one sentence in his long quote from Sulzer’s article on the symphony: Koch leaves out the sentence stating that the

symphony should show “an apparent disorder in the melody and harmony” (*anscheinende Unordnung in der Melodie und Harmonie*), since he probably did not consider this passage suitable to his didactic and aesthetic purposes. The description of the symphony is one of the few passages in both Koch and Sulzer that reveals not only a certain reconciliation toward the perplexing variety of the new Italian instrumental style but even an innovative approach to a theory of instrumental music supported by a concept of the sublime. The question is why Koch was not able to appreciate Haydn’s *Distratto* in this context. Perhaps Koch was unable to relate the comic tone of this symphony with the concept of the sublime. Another reason, perhaps, is that the description of the symphony in Sulzer’s encyclopedia makes express reference to the “chamber symphony”—that is, to symphonies that do not introduce either a theatrical work or a sacred work. A symphony written as an overture to a theatrical work (such as *Il distratto*), however, “allows fewer digressions” according to Sulzer. There is also the fact that the article on the symphony in Sulzer’s encyclopedia is not fully consistent, even seems contradictory in parts and is likely a co-production of more than one author.

[15] After his polemic against Haydn’s *Distratto*, Koch turns his attention to another path by which *Witz* has crept into music. Whereas Koch’s first warning was against a type of *Witz* that violated his concept of *Empfindung*, Koch’s second warning focuses on “clownery” in music. Koch describes how a certain composer, seeking applause, first builds “extraordinary difficulties” into his compositions and then, to curry more favor with the audience, turns to “comic” effects. It can be assumed that this passage, which immediately follows the criticism of *Il distratto*, is still directed at Haydn. The charge of mixing the serious with the comic that is discernable in Koch’s writing is a fixture of the critique of Italian-influenced music in the 18th century. This criticism was especially common in early Haydn reception, and those who did not appreciate the fusion of these two elements “were in essence objecting to the subversion of aesthetic illusion and the concomitant threat to the very basis of aesthetic experience. The concept of moving the affections was in danger of being exposed as nothing more than a calculated scheme based on artifice.”⁽⁵³⁾ Koch, however, writes not only generally about the mixture of the serious and the comic but about a certain composer

as well. Koch's description corresponds to the traditional narration of Haydn's stylistic development in the 1770s: While the works of the late 1760s and early 1770s were characterized by certain compositional difficulties (contrapuntal techniques and use of the *Sturm und Drang* idiom), a new orientation takes hold in the mid 1770s (according to this narration) to produce a plethora of works in the "popular" style—a new orientation that was often associated with Haydn's theater symphonies such as *Il distratto*. H.C. Robbins Landon, for example, authored a polemic against such "popular symphonies" that is nearly as strong as Koch's polemic and relies on the same arguments. Landon calls such symphonies "at best uninspired concessions to popular taste" and claims that "the art of the symphony in Haydn's hands now begins to suffer that long and sad deterioration which will reach a low point in the symphonies of about 1780."⁽⁵⁴⁾ James Webster criticized such talk of deterioration as untenable, though it was not so much the tendency toward the popular itself that he called into question as its negative interpretation.⁽⁵⁵⁾ It can not be said with certainty whether Koch's narration of deterioration is an indication that the line of argument criticized by Webster goes all the way back to Haydn's contemporaries or whether it simply indicates that Koch was referring to a composer other than Haydn in this part of his polemic. If Koch's narration of deterioration does indeed refer to Haydn, however, this might be one explanation why Koch did not include any of Haydn's work after the 1770s in his compositional treatise, even though some of these works found their way to Rudolstadt, as the court archives show.

V. Peroratio

[16] Koch's polemic against *Il distratto* shows that there are fundamental differences between his aesthetic views and Haydn's compositional practice. What is the significance of these differences for a "historically informed" analysis that aims to incorporate Koch's theory? Naturally, one could say that Koch took over Sulzer's ideas without questioning them and that his technical terminology, his "mechanical rules of composition," could be disassociated from its aesthetic backdrop. The aesthetic concept of *Empfindung* and the compositional concept of punctuation form do indeed derive from two different and independent 18th-century traditions, and there were already attempts in the 18th century to separate the concept of punctuation

form from rigid rhetorical concepts.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The principle of punctuation form in its very general sense, which is also expressed in Koch's work, is part of the common understanding of the 18th century. This can easily be demonstrated in both the theory and compositional practice. It is not characteristic only of the compositions of the "galant style," whose outer appearance, in contrast to the continuity of many baroque compositions, is marked by an abundance of different caesuras and discontinuities that result from the line up of galant schemata.⁽⁵⁷⁾ It is also found in the work of almost all theorists of the 18th century, although there is a great disparity in how the punctuation terminology is used. The idea of punctuating musical phrases through standardized endings may be one of the oldest and most long-lived formal principles of compositional history, with origins that can be traced back to the *clausulae* classifications of early polyphony. The idea of punctuation through cadences is also found in the Italian tradition of *partimenti*, and the significance of this tradition for the Italian-influenced instrumental music of the 18th century can hardly be overstated.⁽⁵⁸⁾ There is no doubt that a very general concept of punctuation form is an indispensable tool to properly understand "form" in the 18th century. The very specific and refined compositional terms and ideas of Koch, however, or his description of the compositional process as a sequence of *Anlage* (plan), *Ausführung* (realization) and *Ausarbeitung* (elaboration), akin to the traditional rhetorical tropes, cannot be freed from their aesthetic backdrop and applied to the music of the 18th century as "neutral" terms of the trade. A theory's terminology is always already imbued with its ideological implications (as Adorno would say). For this reason, I share Nancy Baker's doubts as to whether Koch's theory is useful in practice: "Whether or not the method of composing which Koch outlines could ever have been used is another matter. In theory, it is possible—although in all likelihood Koch himself did not compose this way."⁽⁵⁹⁾ Koch's *Versuch* unites speculative, regulative and analytical elements of music theory, but their interrelationship is deductive and top-down, not inductive and bottom-up: The aesthetic speculation leads to regulative rules that are verified through analytical examples. In this context, I find it rather questionable that Koch's *Versuch* "closely followed practice." Koch's *Versuch* is frequently praised for having translated Sulzer's theory into compositional practice. In essence, however, Koch's *Versuch* only demonstrates the chasm that existed at the time of Haydn and

Koch between “speculative traditions” on the one hand (which gained importance during the neoclassical period as *aesthetic* speculations on a system of fine arts) and “practical traditions” on the other (which developed rapidly through Italian instrumental music).

[17] That is not an argument against the analytical applicability of contemporary theories, however. The adequacy of an artistic method is (as Carl Dahlhaus argued) determined not by *which* method one applies but *how* and *why* one applies it.⁽⁶⁰⁾ No analytical approach exists in a theoretical vacuum. Even “contemporary” terminology does not make it possible to discuss compositions “authentically” or without theoretical premises. *Any* analytical approach, therefore, can and must incorporate its heuristic preconditions into its analysis and classify its results appropriately on this basis. The awareness of the differences identified between contemporary theory and practice, for example, can only make a “historically informed” analysis more productive. Studying how Koch’s ideas and metaphors relate to various styles and phases in Haydn’s work make it possible to draw conclusions from the varying degrees of adequacy offered by Koch’s theory. By examining the adequacy of Koch’s idea of “unity of expression,” one could study the development of the characteristic short-range topical flexibility. One could also describe the shift from Haydn’s earlier style characterized by numerous interruptions and cadences to his later, more expansive and cohesive style, in which a system of divisions and punctuation was less important.⁽⁶¹⁾ Moreover, one could use a “weakness” of Koch’s theory mentioned by Joel Lester⁽⁶²⁾—its neglect of thematic “content” in favor of the punctuated conclusion—for an examination of the symphonies of Haydn: One could demonstrate, for example, how the initial dominance of certain punctuated formal models in the 1750s and 60s (such as Koch’s punctuated *Hauptform*) changed over time into a dominance of certain thematic sequences.⁽⁶³⁾ Differences of this type are found not only chronologically between different creative periods of Haydn, however. Koch’s principle of phrase expansion, for example, can be used to demonstrate that the characteristics of the “punctuated” style referred to in the *Versuch* are found chiefly in specific genres, specific movements or in the context of specific musical topics in Haydn’s work. Another difference between Koch and Haydn relates to the beginning

of the second main section of large musical forms. In the 1770s, Haydn began gradually departing from what had up to then been a standard formal element in the *allegro* movements of his symphonies, namely, the introduction of the main theme in the secondary key at the start of the second part, followed immediately by the same theme in the main key and then a “development” section. This “medial return,”⁽⁶⁴⁾ a type of “developmental rotation” as defined by Hepokoski and Darcy, became increasingly rare with Haydn starting in the 1770s, yet it is precisely this phenomenon that Koch insists on in the second volume of his *Versuch* in the 1780s.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Only in the third volume of the *Versuch*, published six years later, does Koch concede the deviation from this principle.⁽⁶⁶⁾ One could cite several possible reasons why Koch first puts forward this standard and then qualifies it. First, one could argue that the idea that the “medial return” had been eliminated in the 1770s is imprecise, since this phenomenon continued with other composers and theorists, even if Haydn used it less. If, however, one holds to the idea of the elimination of the “medial return” in the 1770s, one could argue that Koch wrote about the deviation from this practice only six years after his own description of the very same practice because it was only then that he encountered works that called for this deviation. (In writing about the deviations, Koch mentions the “modern symphonies” and “many Haydn and nearly all Dittersdorf symphonies.”) This reason would reinforce the suspicion that Koch only belatedly incorporated changes to compositional practice and that a change to compositional practice that can be seen in Haydn’s work of the late 1760s is only reflected in Koch’s writings in the late 1780s. A final reason would be that it is part of Koch’s didactic strategy to present narrowly defined compositional standards first and only later show the possible and common deviations from such standards. This interpretation is backed up by Koch’s own statement that in his *Versuch* he will not only present the “main forms” but also “the most important and frequent deviations.”⁽⁶⁷⁾

VI. Conclusio

[18] When we approach the music of Haydn from Koch’s perspective, we should be aware that Koch is referring to a particular style and that much of his *Versuch* is a polemic against a type of instrumental music that has strayed too far from his ideal of vocal music. Koch’s insistence on “unity” and “definiteness of expression” and thus

on the fundamental paradigm of vocal music is an adherence to a concept of music that Koch saw disappearing: “If we look at recent compositions,” Koch writes, “we have to contrast an almost countless number of instrumental pieces with a small number of vocal pieces. How much the possible effect of music is lessened with this prevalent separation from poetry is easy to understand.”⁽⁶⁸⁾ It might be an open question whether *Il distratto* is among Haydn’s greatest symphonies. But the echoes of *Il distratto* can be “heard throughout Haydn’s works” and “suggest a rich source of humor in the paradox of seeming distraction.”⁽⁶⁹⁾ It is works such as these in particular where Haydn shows his talent for taking originally linguistic phenomena such as humor, caprice, wit or irony and portraying them in an immanently musical manner: a talent that was a key factor in spreading Haydn’s fame throughout the world even during his lifetime. When Haydn’s *Il distratto* made its way to Rudolstadt, however, Heinrich Christoph Koch was not amused: this is indicative of Koch’s relationship to modern instrumental music.

[19] The example of Koch and Haydn makes clear that “historically informed” analysis can not be limited to applying the metaphors of individual theorists to contemporary compositions. “Historically informed” analysis in the best sense of the term can only consist of viewing a composition against the varied backdrop of the compositions that preceded it, contemporary practice and the compositions that followed it on the one hand balanced against contemporary theories and their relationship to actual compositional practice on the other.⁽⁷⁰⁾ The role played here by contemporary theory is secondary, since the history of theory always follows its own laws and discourses as well, sometimes even with tendencies that contradict the practice of the day.⁽⁷¹⁾ Only by considering these tensions and differences does analysis respect the fact that the work of art *and* the contemporary theory *and* the modern analyst should all be seen as historical through and through.