

## **Basso: A Low Point in the Study of Musical Meaning and Metaphor**

Robert Nelson, Office of Learning & Teaching, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

### **Abstract**

Recent literature encourages an exploration of musical meaning through metaphor, as the affective character of music is allusive, evocative and seldom literal. But while in theory metaphor can explain aspects of musical meaning, in practice the definitions of metaphor are as vague and various as the abstract sounds that they would elucidate. Scholars have not handled the awkward historical slipperiness of metaphors which, like language, change over time. Using the example of low notes, this article historicizes the metaphorical motif of deep sounds, showing how 'high' and 'low' follow a suggestive vein of poetic intuition. Historically, 'high' and 'low' carry persistent social and moral connotations. Examining the philology behind conceptions of lowness from antiquity to the baroque, this article proposes that low notes—and low instruments and their parts—have different meanings to their higher-frequency counterparts; in particular, it inquires into how much the prevailing associations of evil and inferiority are induced upon low registers and under what conditions this 'baseness' may be redeemed. Proposing patterns for the simultaneous terror and benign authority of lowness from fields beyond music, the article argues that the backdrop of evil in bass and base (*basso*) is a necessary semantic element in the aesthetic development of European multi-voiced music. The moral or psychological metaphor is thus integral to the aesthetic content of music.

## **1. Introduction**

Music can be understood as meaningful without the agency of metaphor. As Eugene Gendlin has explained, meaning consists in an ‘implicit intricacy’ within a sonic configuration which is ‘carried forward’ to the configurations that follow (Gendlin 1997 and 2004). Music, and especially instrumental music, could be considered as an aesthetically pleasing abstract set of agreements or dissonance, without reference to other realities, with a self-contained flow of accords or clashes, indicating no correspondences beyond their internal relationships. Nevertheless, since Aristotle, music has been related to imitation (Sörbom 1994) and it seems difficult to detach music from expression, which implicitly acknowledges a symbolic transfer beyond the sounds themselves. Music arrives at imitation not necessarily by directly replicating the sounds of people or nature—like chirping birds—but by behaving suggestively, by proposing an analogy to other kinds of experience, like sleeping or fighting or stealth or erotic rapture. It seems logical to see such analogies as a form of metaphor.

The idea that the meaning of music is pre-eminently metaphorical has gained scholarly momentum, encouraged through compelling publications by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 1987, 1999, 2007) which emphasized the way that human intelligence is embodied, where physical realities are described and handled intellectually by means of analogous words or images, pictures and other sensory realities apprehended through the body. These embodied motifs transfer to more abstract arguments but, by means of metaphor, poetically recover the corporal origins of abstract thought. The ideas were reinforced by the philosopher Roger Scruton who argued that we require metaphor not just to compose music or appreciate music ourselves but to imagine the musical experience of anyone listening (Scruton 1983). Although Lakoff and Johnson have been criticized by recent scholars for perpetuating dualities of mind and body (Friedman, 2014), there is widespread consensus that musical experience gains meaning through metaphorical associations.

### **1.1 The question**

The case is not simple, however, because metaphors vary in degree and kind; and it follows that the way we understand them has an impact on the way that we construct music in our minds (Guck 1991 and Hatten 1995). It is tantalizing to posit meaning in the metaphorical agency of music, because an analysis of different kinds of metaphor could potentially explain different aspects of musical meaning. This important discourse has far-reaching implications for musical scholarship, as Andrew Friedman sums up: ‘At stake, then, is nothing less than a theory of musical meaning’ (Friedman 2014, 9). Potentially, metaphor explains the ineffable quality of music; but there is a problem of circularity in the quest, because metaphor is itself fugitive and hard to generalize, sharing much of the ambiguity in the phenomenon that it describes.

Some metaphors are colourful extensions of language, where we describe psychological or intellectual things by means of physical things. An example is ‘a weighty discourse’ or a ‘lightweight theory’. As applied to people, one could describe ‘a warm person’, meaning a generous or encouraging person, as opposed to a ‘cold individual’, that is, an unsympathetic character with an impersonal manner. Both humans have a similar thermometer reading at c.37°; but we immediately know that the reference to temperature is figurative and that it refers to character. Other kinds of metaphor, however, are more an inevitable and intrinsic part of language, integral with the structure of words from their various roots, like ‘interpretation’, whose roots mean a ‘take’ on something that you communicate between people. Most abstract words have this metaphorical dimension—like metaphor itself, a carrying across or transfer (φέρω, I carry)—revealed in an etymology of physical verbs. Then there are other kinds of metaphor which also derive from an image where there is no alternative expression. Language is an example, where the word derives from the tongue; but even if we say: ‘English is my mother tongue’, the tongue is not the tongue itself but the structure of words and sounds—admittedly partly shaped by the tongue—which goes far beyond the physical reality of the long spongy muscle in the mouth and gullet, which is shared by dogs and cattle who do not have language. Into this category is the description of degree, like ‘high and low’, which can apply to so many operational things, like income tax, as well as physical things like walls or trees. When we say a high honour, we mean a great honour, a considerable gesture of praise. But the metaphor for a scale of virtue is ambiguous and seldom absolute,

as we know when we speak negatively of the ‘height of rudeness’, or ‘highly arrogant’ or even ‘high hopes’, which may be convoluted and sarcastic; and similarly, our positive ‘weighty discourse’ above can be contrasted with a ‘heavy case’, which is onerous and burdensome.

We are used to metaphors applying to music such as walking and running or fighting, already enshrined in tempo markings like *andante* and baroque suite names such as *courante* or *battaglia*; and literal associations with corporal movements are the origin of any dance like *gavotte* or *passacaglia*. It seems semantically obvious to describe these musical ideas as metaphor; if anything, the question is whether they are more like dead metaphors, commonly accepted phrases, which some scholars consider hardly to be metaphors at all (Pawelec 2006). So too with the description of pitch. When we speak of pitch as high and low, how much might the description be considered metaphoric, before we imagine the rising and falling induced upon the emotions through melody? Can we even say what is a metaphoric description and what is an awkwardly *de facto* physical description, albeit with metaphoric origins? Recent scholarship has brought us to a paradox, where we understand that music gains meaning through metaphor but we have difficulty identifying where metaphors start and stop. Because the metaphors are so basic to the way that we describe even the most technical aspects of music, it seems hard to judge where the metaphors go beyond their physical origin. So while there is much promise that metaphoric readings might be possible, the tempting link between music and metaphor is deadlocked by vagueness, and we are frustrated in gathering useful semantic corollaries. Further, though recent scholarship has scrupulously parsed the most philosophically interesting interpretations of musical metaphor in its symbolic elasticity, none, it seems, has considered that metaphor is also a shifting linguistic phenomenon that must be historicized to make sense when applied to any example of music in history.

This article examines one example which typifies the ambiguity of musical metaphor of a technical nature, namely the description of pitch at one end of the scale, that is, lowness. Like so many other terms where language scrambles after the sensual uniqueness of music, low notes are not pre-eminently understood as metaphorical but rather the notes to the left on the keyboard, or the notes at the bottom of the stave. Exactly how much metaphorical pregnancy should be ascribed to this sense of the scale remains open to question. Rather than seek to answer the question in the abstract, the method

followed in this article is to open up the historical perspective, where various perceptions of lowness from antiquity to the baroque help us understand the suggestiveness of low notes in music; and in this way, the inquiry also helps us understand how metaphor builds meaning in music.

### **1.2 A Method to Triangulate Lowness**

The method followed in this article is designed to establish a third point against the apparently inscrutable line between music and metaphor. This point is the history of the chosen metaphor, independently garnered from the history of ideas and at times poetic phenomenology. The key to the method is to scrutinize the metaphor in general language, as far as possible from the technical acceptance of ‘low notes’ as opposed to ‘high notes’. As the first study of its kind, the article identifies the way that lowness was spoken of in general narratives throughout formative periods of western music, art, literature and design, from antiquity to the baroque. It does not follow a canonically musicological method so much as an independent philological analysis, to be brought back to the application of music throughout the periods in question.

### **2. Can Lowness be Metaphorical by Coincidence?**

High and low, like long and short, are among the most pervasive metaphors in common language and are also the organizing metrics of music and compositional forms like architecture. We find it hard to talk about mood or psychological processes or social status without using such metaphors (and of course the very word ‘hard’ involves an analogous metaphor, also used in music in some languages for major and minor, like the German *dur* and *moll*). All the basic physical properties that function dichotomously—like sharp and blunt, push and pull, light and dark, shallow and deep, thick and thin, point and area, heavy and light, head and bottom, to say nothing of relational prepositions like on and off, over and under, to and from—are drawn into abstract language through metaphor. We would have a much impoverished vocabulary for abstract thought without the agency of metaphor. Abstract words are frequently based on metaphors, like ‘conception’, which is a ‘grasping’ (*cepo*, Latin for ‘I grip’). Many lofty abstract ideas are expressed by means of an earthy expression of direction or size or mass or pointedness and so on.

Aesthetic metaphors are complicated because they are seldom purely aesthetic but often carry moral connotations. High and low are a case in point. In music, there may be no implications of high and low notes having a different moral value; but in common speech, high is associated with excellence and low is associated with the abject. Certainly, the notes in music may all have a similar merit; but in common speech, we may still say that the performance will be a ‘high-point’ or a ‘low-point’ of the season; and a musician, just like a dentist, will be held in high esteem or low regard. There are few areas of life that avoid these connotations; and so a question arises as to whether or not lowness in music itself is conditioned by the prevailing metaphor. As already intimated—and as will be investigated closely—the word for bass is derived from low in Italian (*basso*) which is also the origin of our word for evil or turpitude, base.

Could it just be an accident? After all, there are other metaphors by which we can describe the low notes in music. Low notes can be called deep, a word which has positive associations when contrasted with ‘shallow’. It works in other languages, too, where deep (like Italian *profondo*, German *tief*) has connotations of penetrating intellectual or spiritual powers, in contrast to the superficial. Again, leaving aside the notes, one prefers a composition which is deep rather than shallow, where shallow would mean frivolous or full of clichés. So with the notes, perhaps it is nothing but a coincidence that we speak of high and low; surely it belongs to the natural elasticity of language that we immediately adjust from a judgemental perspective to a physical one. Words are never entirely adequate to the phenomena that they describe, which depend on context to be exact; and in music, in particular, we can expect a gap between common usage and technical acceptance. An example might be the terms ‘major’ and ‘minor’, which normally suggest a hierarchy or scale from important to trivial, whereas musicians impute no more greatness to ‘major’ than to ‘minor’; and, as noted, a different metaphor might apply to the same phenomenon in another language. If anything, we would attach less triviality to the minor keys, as they communicate gravity and pathos. Bass may share a derivation with base; but we instantly switch our frame of reference in the same way that English spelling indicates (bass or base); and so too with low, which in one context means inferior but in another might have neutral connotations, as when one apartment is lower than another, which casts no necessary reflexion on its merit. Language is never perfect; and the association of low with baseness has no great relevance to a musical scale, especially

when we can describe low notes or parts in music as deep, with positive and flattering connotations of profundity which offset the philological accident of bass aligning with baseness.

## 2.1 Is Deep Good?

But is it true that deep and profound always had such grand and sympathetic connotations? In renaissance and baroque times, deep is more usually associated with negative conditions than positive ones. We tend to see deep—as in deep emotion or deep thinking—as the opposite of shallow; but in older usage, the pattern was reversed: deep was more likely to have been opposed to the heavenly. A strong spatiality haunts the metaphor, in which deep is literally low or nethermost, equated with the bottom (*ima e profunda*, Tasso, *Rime* 120.3). As in the well-known hymn *De profundis*, out of the depths I cry to thee, the depths represent the dark and abject crisis, as in Tasso (*dal profondo oscuro a te mi volgo*, 747.4.9). One powerful image-root for the word is the tomb—‘to see how deep my grave is made’ (Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI* 3.2)—where the coincidence of low and abject is somehow fateful and gloomy, in effect ‘the profoundest pit’ (*Hamlet* 4.5) because it buries life itself.

Never far from the motif of burial, the metaphor struck sinister roots. Depth is frequently linked to forgetfulness (*profundo oblio nel core*, Tasso, *Rime* 129, 1085.1.11 and 1094.4.4), as in Shakespeare’s ‘deeper than oblivion’ (*All’s well that ends well* 5.3) or Racine’s profound forgetfulness (*en un profond oubli*, *Phèdre* 2.6). From the fourteenth century to the baroque, shades of the mortal occur often in the description of deep scars or wounds (*la sua piaga aspra et profunda*, Petrarch 342.4, ‘Deep scars to save thy life’, *Comedy of errors* 5.1; ‘The private wound is deep’st’, *Two gentlemen of Verona* 5.4), though deep wounds could also be valued from early times as the invasion of the erotic into the fibre of soberness (*le prime piaghe, sí dolci profonde*; Petrarch 196.4), in the same way that you might poetically celebrate a deep river of tears (Petrarch 230.9–11) which Shakespeare still enjoys in ‘My heart’s deep languor and my soul’s sad tears’ (*Titus Andronicus* 3.1).

## 2.2 Depth and Damnation

Directly moral conditions described through depth are mostly negative. For example, shame is deep, as in Shakespeare's 'deep shames and great indignities', (*Comedy of errors* 5.1) or 'Deep shame had struck me dumb' (*King John* 4.2). It arises with deprivation, as in 'deepest winter in Lord Timon's purse' (*Timon of Athens* 3.4) or hatred, as with 'The deepest loathing to the stomach' (*A midsummer night's dream* 2.2) or malice and evil: 'Deep malice makes too deep incision' (*Richard II* 1.1) or 'the deepest malice of the war' (*Coriolanus* 4.4), like Macbeth's murderous 'black and deep desires' (*Macbeth* 1.4) or grief and pain, as in 'the poison of deep grief' (*Hamlet* 4.5) or Racine's '*douleur profonde*' (*Phèdre* 1.2). Most memorably, depth is linked to hell, as in Racine's deep abode of the dead (*des morts la profonde demeure*, *Phèdre* 2.1) or Shakespeare's 'pond as deep as hell' (*Measure for measure* 3.1) or 'deep as hell I should down' (*Merry wives of Windsor* 3.5) or the sin that takes you there, 'such deep sin' (*Richard II* 1.1) or 'Would I be guilty of so deep a sin' (*Richard III* 3.1). Thanks to its abiding physicality, depth is profoundly linked to the abyss (*ne gli oscuri d'oblio profondi abissi*, Tasso, *Rime* 107.14) or Shakespeare's 'deep pit, poor Bassianus' grave' (*Titus Andronicus* 3.1) or Racine's '*Les abîmes profonds qui s'offrent devant moi*' (*Esther* 3.1), '*Dans un gouffre profond Sion est descendue*', (*Athalie* 3.8) and hence Shakespeare's 'deep damnation' (*Macbeth* 1.7). For that reason, too, it goes with gaol (*dal mio carcer profondo*, Tasso, *Rime* 668.8; *Ora, in carcer profundo, o son cresciuti, ibid.* 696.1.9 and *cava profonda*, 698.1.12). More than any image, deep is associated with the ocean, often threateningly, as in Tasso (*alcun'onda nel profondo letto*, 1149.7 or 1354.1.5) or Shakespeare, 'Into the fatal bowels of the deep' (*Richard III* 3.4) or Racine (*dans la profonde mer CEnone s'est lancée*, *Phèdre* 5.5).

## 2.3 Depth and Awe

Sometimes, depth is associated with calm and sleep, as in Racine ('Dans un calme profond Darius endormi', *Alexandre le Grand* 1.2, 'Jérusalem goûte un calme profond', *Athalie* 2.5, 'Tout d'un calme profond lui présente l'image', *Athalie* 5.3) or silence ('è profondo silenzio in umil core', Tasso, *Rime* 351.15, 'profond silence', *Athalie* 1.2 or 5.1) and peace ('une paix profonde', *Alexandre* 2.2 and *Bérénice* 2.2) and quite often the night, as in Shakespeare's 'deep of night' (*Julius Caesar* 4.3 and *Merry wives of Windsor* 4.4)



or Racine's 'nuit profonde' (*Britannicus* 2.3) or the horror of a deep night ('l'horreur d'une profonde nuit', *Athalie* 2.5, *Athalie* 3.4), which is so often both calm and black. Shade, of course, is related both to depth and to hell, as in Racine ('des cavernes sombres / Lieux profonds et voisins de l'empire des ombres', *Phèdre* 3.5).

Occasionally, depth is related to respect, as in Racine ('Par de profonds respect', *Bajazet* 3.2; 'mes respects profonds', *Bajazet* 3.3, 'ces profonds respects que la terreur inspire', *Esther* 2.7) which express sentiments of awe and, from early times, the heart was often described as deep (*cor profundo*, Petrarch 94.1, 310.9–11) and sometimes the deep heart is revealed by the surface of expression (*le paure et gli ardimenti / del cor profondo ne la fronte legge*, Petrarch 157.5–6). So too the deep breast (*nel profondo petto / i gran secreti suoi nasconda e cele*; Tasso, 238.6–8) which is echoed in Shakespeare's 'profound heart' (*Twelfth night* 1.5) and which perhaps resonates with sighing in Shakespeare: 'Why sigh you so profoundly?' (*Troilus and Cressida* 4.2) and 'He raised a sigh so piteous and profound' (*Hamlet* 2.1), which can also betoken something dangerous in 'these sighs, these profound heaves' (*Hamlet* 4.1).

#### 2.4 Depth and the Treachery of Thought

Depth is connected with thinking in a dubious way, as in Shakespeare's line that 'the conceit is deeper than you think' (*Taming of the shrew* 4.3). It can be linked to wisdom ('sa sagesse profonde', *Athalie* 3.6); and when the renaissance Tasso speaks of it, he poetically relishes the paradox that knowledge can be both high and deep ('sì alto sapere e sì profondo', *Rime* 891.1.4, cf. 985.4.11 and 'sì che traluce al mio pensier profondo', 1355.2.3), which is like the contemporaneous Bandello's high and deep questions ('questioni altissime e profonde', *Novelle* 2.50). Bandello also describes someone as so deeply steeped in love (*sì profundato nei suoi pensieri amorosi*) that he forgot to eat (1.23). Although one can laud deep science ('profonda scienza', Bandello 1.35), it seems telling that when Bandello describes a deep theologian (*profondo teologo*, letter at 3.9) the example is Martin Luther, a rogue heretic to be trusted in no circumstance. Luther for Bandello is like Shakespeare's Gloster, 'a man / Unsounded yet and full of deep deceit' (*2 Henry VI* 3.1). Most strikingly, depth is associated with duplicity: 'both dissemble deeply their affections' (*Taming of the shrew* 4.4). It calls for 'deep suspicion: ghastly looks' (*Richard III* 3.5) and 'So deep suspicion, where all faith was meant' (*Henry VIII*

3.1). Thus does one ‘take deep traitors for thy dearest friends’ (*Richard III* 1.3). Depth is not to be trusted, like ‘some shallow story of deep love’ (*Two gentlemen of Verona* 1.1). It toggles treacherously with emptiness and deception (Deep, hollow, treacherous, and full of guile, *Richard III* 2.1) and so too can one ‘counterfeit the deep tragedian’ (*Richard III* 3.5). Depth seems never far from concealing evil, ‘with a virtuous vizard hide deep vice!’ (*Richard III* 2.2), and is apt to describe a malevolent pact: ‘She’s with the lion deeply still in league’ (*Titus Andronicus* 4.1). The same twist occurs with the English word profound: ‘A huge translation of hypocrisy, / Vilely compil’d, profound simplicity’ (*Love’s labour’s lost* 5.2). To be deep is possibly to be fake: ‘to be dress’d in an opinion / Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit’ (*Merchant of Venice* 1.1).

## 2.5 Depth and Fear

Caution must be exercised in these associations, because the metaphor of deep might be seen as merely a statement of degree; so like the word ‘extreme’, it has no intrinsic value or meaning of itself but only represents an intensity of the thing that it describes, whether good or bad. So Shakespeare’s ‘deep demeanour in great sorrow’ (*2 Henry IV* 4.5) or ‘deep melancholy’ (*2 Henry VI* 5.1) or ‘deep despair’ (*3 Henry IV* 3.3) or even ‘profound sciatica’ (*Measure for measure* 1.2) and ‘deep rebuke’ (*2 Henry IV* 4.5) are not in themselves telling signs of negativity in depth. In a neutral way, one can laugh so hard or deeply that you split your sides: ‘With such a zealous laughter, so profound, / That in this spleen ridiculous appears’ (*Love’s labour’s lost* 5.2).

There is no doubt that profundity can be positive, as with religiousness, ‘More holy and profound’ (*Coriolanus* 3.3). Shakespeare acknowledges ‘profound Solomon’ (*Love’s labour’s lost* 4.3) and there is something wrong if ‘fools should be so deep contemplative’ (*As you like it* 2.7). But the trend is to identify depth on an axis that has divinity up high and the tomb down low. Only occasionally is deep associated with sound, as in ‘the deep dread-bolted thunder?’ (*Lear* 4.7) and ‘the thunder, / That deep and dreadful organ-pipe pronounc’d’ (*Tempest* 3.3) where it is directly intimidating; though as we will see with the Italian baroque, it can also be benign, albeit in a spooky way, evoking the death-rattle: ‘O, but they say the tongues of dying men / Enforce attention like deep harmony’ (*Richard II* 2.1). It is wholly benign in another rich analogy: ‘For government, through high and

low and lower, / Put into parts, doth keep one in consent, / Congreeing in a full and natural close / Like music.” (*Henry V* 1.2).

Although there is no absolute certainty, it seems that things that are deep have a sinister fearsome resonance, threatening and grave, which aligns with both the tomb and gravity. When in music, a low voice underlies a high voice, it seems likely that the sighs and groans, the deep rebuke, suspicion and dread transfer somewhat to the great abstraction of music. Subjectively speaking, some of the counterfeit survives in the counterpoint, as if the instruments of different pitch are in contention, with the high notes figuratively seizing the high moral ground and the lower notes bringing to them the condiment of gravity—but with lots of clashes and piquant discord—, something dark and dangerous, a bit threatening and matching the flight of certain melodic high voices with gloomy horror.

### 3. Dynamic Metaphors

Metaphors are capable of inversion. For example, in painting, the beauty of light (extolled by poets as divine and hallowed) owes its lustre to darkness, which explains why so many luminous renaissance and baroque masters like Titian, Guercino or Rembrandt preferred a dark background. In the art of painting—where the purest white is still quite dull compared to sunshine—the light takes on a richness not by dint of white paint but the contrasty support of luminous shadows; and, as Tasso says, a painter never threw in colour to depict the beautiful night just as you do not mix fine light with deep shadow (*né mesce a sì bei lumi ombre profonde*, 411.3). Under the title of *chiaroscuro*, darkness, typically associated with evil and ignorance, is paradoxically integral to virtue (Nelson 2011). The element which is stigmatized turns out to be the platform upon which the glory relies. It is true of all illusionistic painting, not just the tenebrism of the baroque. There is nothing in a picture which appears as light unless a couch of shade can allow it to assume its radiant definition, else we look at whitish paint of no evocative properties.

In aesthetic terms, high and low are even more integral to one another. A tune—setting aside the invention of harmony or vertical sound—consists entirely of higher and lower notes by longer or shorter durations; and, because in a melody we love all the notes irrespective of pitch, there may be no pre-eminence of the higher ones. If language credits higher things with greater virtue, it seems immaterial in playing or listening to music.

However, in some music, it seems as if the higher registers have a more prestigious role because they seem to spearhead the melody; further, in some music, very high notes are hard to reach with accuracy, as with a triumphant vocal *coloratura*, clinched at its tense heights with great relief to the audience once achieved. High notes may be hard to reach (as with a recorder, once it goes beyond two octaves) but the low notes are also often hard to play with force. In one sense, however, it makes little sense to say that the high notes in a single line of melody are more valuable than the lower notes, because they all manifestly form an integral and organic totality which we call melody.

Why, in any case, musical notes should be described as high and low—when physics distinguishes them by frequency—has been questioned by scholars from psychonomic disciplines (Maeda, 2013) who argue that auditory pitch induces a visual motion illusion and hence attracts the metaphor which it would not take on by qualities inherent in the sounds. A more prosaic response might be to draw attention to the conventional structure of writing music on the stave, in which the high notes are literally higher up on the graph, arguably with no necessary logic. Alas, we cannot easily test the theory that the stave determines high and low, because western vocabularies do not reveal a time when high and low were used of musical sounds prior to the epoch of written music. Music was already written down in ancient Greece, leaving only the Homeric period as prenotational. Homeric Greek, however, does not apply high and low to music. It is also notable that while there may be a more flattering alternative to express low notes—namely ‘deep’ notes, though it remains uncertain—we cannot see a parallel with high notes, which have never been described as shallow, even if sometimes the colour might be described as ‘shrill’. If we use another generic word, it might be the ‘top’ notes. Wherever the metaphor of high and low prevails, implicit value judgements are not far away, favouring high and begrudgingly admitting the low.

### **3.1 The Application to Music in Multiple Parts**

Just as we might feel inclined to see music resisting the implicit morality of high and low (high being the good and low being the bad or base, *basso*, by that telling ambiguity of language), music is much more than melody. Melody may be the pre-eminent quality of western metrical music; but in most performed genres since the middle ages, music was arranged in different voices. Initially, this may have involved little more than a drum or

drone that accompanied one voice, more or less providing padding or a beat for the single voice that rose above it. But the bulk of early music already reveals a bass part. With the development of the keyboard, the bass notes could even be played in the left hand by a single performer while the right hand typically provided the melody on the higher side of the scale.

The continuity of the drone is perhaps recalled in the delightful Italian baroque term *basso continuo*, a bass line that keeps going, or as English musicians would say in the same period, a ‘thorough bass’, meaning a bass that runs through the piece (‘through’ and ‘thorough’ possessing the same etymology). Romantic music makes us think that high and low instruments are put together to make a duet; but that conception does not belong to earlier music, right through the baroque. Even in the romantic period, a piece for violin and piano is not referred to as a duet but a violin sonata (with accompaniment). In the baroque a solo which is unaccompanied is rare and will often be published with the stipulation of being unaccompanied, so that there is no confusion and musicians do not go hunting for the missing part or invent one for good measure.

### **3.2 The Authority of the Bass**

Baroque music is metrically regular but the most regular aspect is always the bass part. The final note tends to be the keynote in the bass part rather than in the treble part if the two do not agree; and the rhythm is maintained most metronomically by the bass. Sometimes, as with an *ostinato* or a ground (and what a telling word that is!) the bass has a role little different to beating time, but lending agreeable harmonies as it goes. Ornament on the bass is not indicated and rapid sequences are often reserved as a kind of wobble that underscores a longer note in the alto voice. Although such moments invite virtuosity in the bass player, there is little doubt that the glory goes to the high voice, while the low voice pumps beneath, acting a bit like a spongy mattress while the alto has all the cerebral fun on top.

There is a physiological basis to high and low as a means of describing frequency or pitch. Deep notes, like those made by a drum or an organ, are felt deep in the chest and belly in a way that reverberates within the internal cavities, whereas the high notes sit rather in the intellect. Eiichi Tosaki (2013) has suggested that this deeper corporal resonance is also the reason that low notes are preferred for collective contexts, like the

drums of war or protest that awesomely shake all lungs—underscoring the solidarity of the troops and bringing terror to the quaking adversary—with the same kind of thud by which we might beat our chest. It might also account for the popularity of the deep beat for dancing in rock music, which is dominated by the electronic bass guitar as well as deep percussion.

A wise anonymous reader, presented with these conundrums involving moral links to high and low, suggested that one might also consider the way that the bass in vocal solos aligns with darkness, giving Handel’s *Messiah* as an example. In the *Messiah*, the solos for bass are

- 5. Thus saith the Lord of hosts
- 10. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth
- 11. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light
- 40. Why do the nations so furiously rage together
- 47. Behold, I tell you a mystery
- 48. The trumpet shall sound.

Meanwhile, the reader notes, ‘the other voices comfort the people, express prophecies, tell good things to Zion, tell the people to rejoice, describe the Lord feeding the flocks, tell the story, give voice to angels, and know that the Redeemer lives.’ An analysis of solo pieces and choral movements started by the bass voices is beyond this study; however, in baroque opera, the bass voices, though often aligning with severe characters, are frequently benign, like the avuncular Solone in Cesti’s *Oronthea* of 1656. The investigation proposed by this article, however, is not about a voice *qua* protagonist but a voice as integral to the total sonority, as in an instrumental sonata or any SATB composition of the period.

### **3.3 Bass by Convenience rather than Design**

Instruments in early music were somewhat interchangeable, provided the notation did not exceed the range that the instrument comfortably plays; and even eighteenth-century composers like Telemann sometimes indicate flexibility, labelling the solo as for violin or flute or oboe, meaning that there is nothing lower than a middle C or higher than a

D#''', which would also fit on a tenor recorder. But when it comes to the *basso continuo*, anything goes. Scores by Handel and others provide the traditional 'figured bass', which means a single line, so that it could easily be played by almost any deeper instrument, a viola da gamba, a bassoon or a bass recorder, anything that might reasonably interpret the line, from a single one-note-at-a-time instrument to ensembles of viol and theorbo. Beneath the staff, there are numbers which indicate the way the single line can be interpreted with chords on a harpsichord or chamber organ, which of course gives the cue to modern editors to create versions for violin and piano, the combination of choice in modern music. But the solo scores that Handel left us, like most composers before him, have the typical thorough bass, written as one note at a time, that allows for chords or single notes in the depths behind the melodic voice.

The bass in much western music means the background. There is undoubtedly a solo repertoire, especially for the beautiful bass viol, which enjoys its own company and received special attention from composer-gambists such as Sainte-Colombe; and the *Six suites for unaccompanied cello* by Bach count among the masterpieces of western music. But these are the exceptions that prove the rule. If one considers all music in which bass instruments feature (and especially baroque music), the bulk of it consigns the beautiful deep company to a lower profile relative to the higher voices. In later music, there are notable and memorable exceptions, such as the sombre bassoon part that begins Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*; and the epoch of electrical bass guitars introduces another order again.

### 3.4 Bass and Gender

High and low become predictable because of hierarchies and scales. In a choir, for example, the bass voices are sung by the men, who naturally stand at the back because they are taller, perhaps to one side; and in any case, the audience cannot easily detect where their voices come from because the long sound waves have no directional address, like the woofer in a sound system which engineers have decided does not need to be split into stereo, as its inscrutable long sound waves always come from no discernable quarter, regardless of where the unit is placed. The bass and baritone voices are rich and impressive, with all the seduction of the *viola da gamba* or any other bass instrument of suave sonorities; but they are sent to the back because the weighty notes are made by big

men who chivalrously recede in space, whose role is to provide the loyal harmonies and to let the women or children—who stand out sonically and spatially in the foreground—seize the limelight with the more melodious parts. It could also be suggested that the higher frequency tones do not travel as well as the deeper, and so need to be placed closer to the audience. With instrumental music today, there may be no correlation between bass instruments and male gender; however, it is notable that in certain traditions, the very deep instruments, like the didgeridoo in Australian Indigenous culture or the dungchen in Tibetan culture, are exclusively played by men.

### 3.5 Bass and Abstraction

The abstraction of the keyboard conceals this somewhat logical equation of bass with big, where the long and deep ‘male’ wires are struck or plucked by keys that all look alike irrespective of their pitch. The abstraction is completed with the design of the upright piano which encases all wires in an even horizontal box, unlike the grand piano or a harpsichord whose irregular shape acknowledges the longer wires on the left. But even with an organ, whose display of enormous bass pipes seems so radically demonstrative, an F at one end of the keyboard looks just like an F at the other end. One makes a high note and the other a low note; and even using our figurative imagination at its most elastic, we have difficulty imagining that the right hand side of the keyboard is like the female part of the choir and the left hand is like the male. If we think that way at all, it would be to confirm the association of evil with the left (*sinistro*, sinister, ἀριστερός, σκαίος, ὑπόσκαίος, all of which have negative associations). In practice, keyboard music is complicated and does not always encourage such dichotomies. Sometimes the left hand is reserved for underlining and keeping the beat but usually both hands have so much to do that we would not easily notice that the deep hand does obeisance to the slightly livelier one on the right, much less impute anything untoward in its rumblings.

## 4. The History of Lowness from Archaic Times

The history of lowness reveals disconnected levels of physicality and abstraction. It was long used as a metaphor for class; and, as Naoko Yamagata (2003) has shown, the metaphor is not only common to different epochs but different geographies. In ancient Greek, one could evoke lowness or lying low (βαθύπεδος) by speaking of depth or



deepness, as in the verb to utter low-pitched sounds (βαρυφωνέω). Sometimes, the idea of moaning in a low tone (ὑποστένω, ὑποστενάζω) or uttering low moans could be conveyed by coupling the motif of pressure with the preposition of ‘beneath’ (ὑπο-); but low in this sense can also mean low or little volume rather than low tone, if one thinks of a moan as the quietest form of a cry or yell.

There is also an almost onomatopoeic vocabulary to describe grumbles (μυνορός), complaining in a low tone, whining, whimpering (τρύζω), to make a low murmuring sound. And most relevant to music, there is a technical vocabulary to describe the lowest of the three strings (νεάτη, by contrast to the middle, μέση, and ὑπάτη); tellingly, however, the lowest string (νεάτη) is the highest in pitch (Plato, *Republic* 443d, Aristotle, *Physics* 224<sup>b</sup>34, *Metaphysics* 1018<sup>b</sup>28, 1057<sup>a</sup>23), so the lowness describes its physical location on the fingerboard rather than the sound that it makes. This inversion could be taken as indicating that the more metaphoric idea of ‘low’ as a sound was weak compared to the physicality of ‘low’ as a position in space. Also, if a hierarchy is to be observed, it too is in reverse order. The string which is highest on the fingerboard makes the deepest sound, and is described as the consular or governing string (ὑπάτη). Finally, the root for the lower string that makes the higher sound (νέατος) only takes on the meaning of lowest in the sense of ‘the uttermost’. It seems archaic and does not feature in Greek much later than Homer (*Iliad* 11.712, 9.153, 295) where it is always spatial (*Iliad* 5.293, 857, 15.341) and sometimes simply means extreme or outermost (*Odyssey* 7.127).

To indicate directionality, one could also use the preposition of ‘down’ to describe the lower (κατώτερος) and lowest (κατώτατος), which really mean ‘further down’ and ‘downmost’ respectively. An authentically ‘low’ is hard to find. Classical Greek recognized the nether regions of the underworld (νέρερος), belonging to the lower world of a theology (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonna* 1548, *Antigone* 602, Aeschylus, *Persians* 622), the nether ones (νέρεροι), meaning the dead (Aeschylus, *Persians* 619), those domiciled in the earth, (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonna* 1576). But these are archaic in exactly the same way that the word ‘nether’ in English only survives in the word netherworld or jocular uses.

#### 4.1 Low and Humble in Ancient Greek

It is not necessary to investigate our concept of low through all prepositions, which even in the English language are complicated in their application, as with ‘under’ in underdog or understanding. The prepositions signal the inferior and the lofty depending on the words to which they are attached, where the concept of ‘beneath’ is either an expression of indignity or solidity, with the implication of providing a base upon which one stands. But the outstanding Greek concept to describe lowness in a metaphorical way is the humble lowness (ταπεινότης) which arose in classical language but became powerfully inflected in biblical Greek. Originally, the concept was geo-physical and applied to low lying places or areas (χώρη, Herodotus 4.191) or low regions (Pindar, *Nemean odes* 3.82) but extended to people of humble or powerless station (Herodotus 7.14, Aristophanes, *Prometheus* 322, Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.5.13) or ‘abased in pride’, as a famous lexicon has it (LSJ *sv.*).

#### 4.2 The Elevation of Low in Hebraic and Christian Tradition

The great enrichment of the concept arose in Hebraic Greek where this condition of disempowered humility precisely expressed the pious ideal of devotion to God. Consider terms like ‘of humble mind’ (ταπεινόφρων), which signified mean-spirited or base in the classical tradition (Plutarch 2.336e) but shed its pejorative sense in biblical Greek, where it denoted the opposite of arrogance or presumption but lowly in mind or humble (*Septuagint, Proverbs* 29.23, *1 Peter* 3.8). Given that God is supremely high, it is a great temerity to vie with him; and the person who submits to being extremely low must be considered more pious than the proud. Jesus himself says that ‘I am meek and lowly in heart’ (ταπεινός τῆ καρδία, *Matthew* 11.29) and commends this condition to us all. It follows that in Christian philosophy, there is at least a theoretical inversion of high and low, because God ‘hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree’ (ὑψωσεν ταπεινούς, *Luke* 1.52) which extends to geography (3.5). The apostle Paul exhorts the good people of Rome: ‘mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits’ (*Romans* 12.16), advice which is echoed frequently (*Ephesians* 4.2, 4.9): ‘Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves’ (*Philippians* 2.3).

The promise in Christianity is that ‘the brother of low degree’ can ‘rejoice in that he is exalted’, while ‘the rich...is made low’ (*James* 1.9–10). In later epochs, this thought would be matched to classical stoicism, where one sees the humble exalted not so much because of a promised afterlife as avoiding the corruption of ambitious courtly wealth. As the seventeenth-century Italian poet Giambattista Marino says, by this lowly state, a kingdom is nothing; because despising treasure nor caring for gold, that is the golden age; that is the treasure’ (*Adone* 1.147). Roman culture would not have immediately recognized the topsy-turvy logic of the *New Testament*. In Latin, which was at its height around the time of Christ, the dichotomy of high and low could hardly have been more rigid. We still use the words by which they describe the twin poles of fortune—superior and inferior—as if orthographically unchanged from antiquity. But the terms have indeed mutated semantically, because their meanings were originally physical (high up and low down or upper and lower), whereas our understanding of them is social, moral or aesthetic by metaphor.

### 4.3 Coincidence of Base and Bass

Whatever the word or language, the concept of low is apt to descend into abjection. The Latin *inferior* was almost predestined to become lesser, poorer and shabbier in the modern languages. So too with the late Latin *bassus*, which is the origin of the Italian *basso* and which, as noted, is our ‘bass’ but also base in the sense of Shakespeare’s ‘degenerate and base’ (*Two gentlemen of Verona* 5.4). In Latin, it remains an obscure etymology of uncertain origins in a person’s name. It is possible that Bassus—indeed a person’s name in Roman times—was a bit like Mr Short or Mr Low (though not Lowe, which is a lion in German, *Löwe*). The only times when the English ‘base’ is positive are when it is derived from the entirely independent Greek word basis (βάσις), as in a statue standing upon a podium or base, or an argument having a good base in a bed of fact, as in Shakespeare’s ‘on base and ground enough’ (*Twelfth night* 5.1), in which the ground simultaneously suggests a sound base in the sense of basis, just as the word for ground in German (*Grund* and the plural ‘grounds’ in English) means cause or reason. This noble meaning has a musical corollary in the ground of baroque music, an *ostinato* in the bass voice.

It is a coincidence of language that base and base (a) sound the same and are spelled in the same way and (b) both indicate something low down. They are identical phonologically and parallel in meaning; but they are unrelated in origin and have no philological connexion, a little like sorrow and sorry, imminent and immanent, grave (Latin heavy *gravis*) and grave (Germanic tomb, *Grab*). When derived from the Latin (*bassus*), base is evil and rotten, as in Milton's 'basest things' that 'Ambition and Revenge descend to' (*Paradise lost* 8.168–71). Whoever aspires to soar high 'must down as low' (*Paradise lost* 7.149). Already in Shakespeare, the spatiality would provide scope for jokes: 'I do affect the very ground, which is base, where her shoe, which is baser, guided by her foot, which is basest, doth tread' (*Love's labour's lost* 1.2) and, long before, Dante had explained that the lower foot is always the firmer ('*si che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso*', *Inferno* 1.30).

#### 4.4 The Charms of *Basso* in Italian

The same *basso* that gives us base also gives us bass. Like the bass in music, *basso* means low but does not necessarily carry the opprobrium of inferior. In the Italian poetic tradition, *basso* has a more redemptive trajectory. As if recalling the modesty of the first Christians, Italian poets approved of a humble mien with low gaze ('*la sembianza umile / con gli occhi bassi*', Dante, *Vita nuova* 13; cf. '*li occhi vergognosi e bassi*', *Inferno* 3.79, or Petrarch's damp and lowered eyes ('*occhi humidi et bassi*', *Canzoniere* 304). The attribute is especially admired when brought on by the modesty of a knowing sexual attraction, a titillating gestural coyness which is echoed in later poetry. By the sixteenth century, low looks could take on a distinctly naughty complexion. Tasso, for instance, lavishes praise on the goddess-like Countess of Scandiano, but his eye is really taken by her maid who has a cute and lascivious aspect (*vezzosetto e lieto viso*) with low and stolen glances (*sguardi bassi e furtivi*) directed to him (*Rime* 369.1.18); and in the following century, Marino describes Venus as cutely ashamed (*vergognosetta*), holding her brow low and her eyes cast downward ('*tenea bassa la fronte e gli occhi chini*', *Adone* 7.219), which is later rehearsed by Adonis (8.42). Given this saucy kittenish tradition, it seems devalued currency when Tasso pretends with appeal to biblical lack of pride that in Pratolino lowness in others becomes sublime and humility is exalted (1285.1–2).

Biblical resonances aside, the artful fourteenth century—the period of international gothic—sees Petrarch launching poetry on its course of paradoxical contraries, which sometimes involve high and low: ‘love spurs me and simultaneously halts me, reassures and frightens, burns and freezes, pleases and scorns, calls me and chases me away; now it holds me in hope and now in pain; my heart leads me up high and down low’ (*Canzoniere* 178). It is the same poet who admires the ‘sweet pious and low murmurings of lovers’ (‘dolce mormorar pietoso et basso’, 286.10; cf. Marino, ‘mormorio languido e basso’, *Adone* 16.43.5 and Shakespeare’s ‘Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound / Reverbs no hollowness’, *Lear* 1.1) and who observes that a lofty woman can be in a low and humble place (294). When a woman is labouring, one gives prayers toward the birth in low tones (*bassi accenti*, 780.4). Though perhaps echoing the gravid condition, these low accents are not grim.

#### **4.5 The Resonance of Renaissance Basso**

Then, in the epoch of the most atmospheric painting and landscape, poets also find prestige in the lower woods rather than the lofty peaks, the foothills or low and humble hills, as Tasso says, where the woodland nymphs and shepherds tryst (455.1) and, in the same *Canzona*, he hopes that his song will reach his woman wherever she be, in parts high and bright or low and gloomy (*bassa e fosca parte*, 455.80). In a sonnet to the image of Boccaccio—who did a line in the depiction of low-life—Tasso says that even Olympus or the leafy Arden can appear to be low (*par basso*, *Rime* 1133.12); and it is a commonplace to describe one’s own verses as low (Petrarch, 332.24) or even one’s very name (*oscuro e basso*, Tasso, *Rime* 1138.11). Using the same phrase, Tasso elsewhere says that dim and low can turn to bright and high (*Rime* 1475.5) by the influence of a charismatic soul.

#### **5. The Baroque Apotheosis of Basso**

For the greater redemption of lowness, however, we enter the baroque, where high and low are less often contrasted as good versus miserable and more often seen as necessary complements in a dynamic continuum, like the in-and-out of architectural detail in a façade and, of course, the meanderings of a melody or the settled sonorities of harmony in ensemble or even keyboard playing. In the colossal erotic epic of Giambattista Marino,

*Adone*, the sensual universe opens up to metaphor, like the sea responding in low and raucous voices (4.78.7–8) or the beautiful flight of a bird, which is rhythmically repetitive in going low and high (*or basso or alto*, 1.66.1–2). Marino still retains the conventional gestural vocabulary of eyes or brow lowered for shame (*basso tien per vergogna a terra il ciglio*, 5.13) but also notes that the sleepy physiognomy of an old duke appears lazy and slow but the low eyebrow conceals a vigilant and sharp wit with prompt discourse and high counsel (16.115).

### 5.1 Baroque Analogies with Nature

In Marino's sensual epic, sound features in a rich atmospheric context. If a warrior shouts out in the woods, the sound is returned in a low murmuring echo from the deep rock (5.76.7–8). Music begins low and rises with the concord of various instruments in the same way that it is sharp and quick, grave and slow (5.146.1–5). These indices of change match the baroque sensibility for variety and surprise, the accommodation of impulse within a matrix, which is a signal part of seventeenth-century aesthetics. In this delight in variety, the image of the bird has some felicitous magic, because its sonorous chirping accords with its flight. The garrulous creature features extensively in the seventh canto of the *Adone*, its sweet language supplicating the dawn: it descends slowly from the peak to the lower branches, taking up the extreme cadences (7.43). It flies and does not stop singing but a witty musician (*sonatore arguto*) joins in emulation with high contrasts, making a competition (*paragone*); and together they rise and fall and swell in labyrinthine sounds that mingle and implicate one another (7.48). Their fantasy plummets (*s'abbassa*) and rises to the sublime with both trills and profound gravity (7.50), flying now low, now high (*or basso, or alto*, 7.51).

### 5.2 Baroque Spectacle, Seduction and *Basso*

The other spectacular motif of high and low in Marino is the fountain, with undoubted appeal to the grand examples that had been built in the mannerist period, like in the grounds of the Villa d'Este, and would continue to provide ceremony in so many town squares, courtyards, city corners and quadrangles. Where urban architecture is solid, with top remaining high and bottom forever low, the fountain is in constant transition: its moving water rises and falls, spilling always to a lower point. Marino loves this liquid

cadence of falling moistness (*umor cadente*) whose humour immediately triggers images of mood and impulse. The motif is expressed in lines that themselves find a sympathetic cadence, as the water turns out slowly and, in this elaborate imaginary structure, slips lazily in ample conches and proceeds to the lower balconies. As the bright wave slowly passes in crystalline steps—always with the sense of downward movement—it acquires a delight in its ambition (8.51.1–8). Spilling over, crashing, rebounding, the lower down, the darker it becomes. The image of lowness is naturalized, almost like the keynote in music upon which the progression settles. The contention of the water, vying in its different currents and spurts, resolves itself in the direction of the lowest part. This motif can be seen as celebrating the lower.

Elsewhere, as if drunk and spellbound by the hypnotic effect of the beautiful waves passing beyond the precipice, one witnesses the rhythms from the highest conch to the lowest, which receives the water in the largest basin, whereupon, in the lowest circle, the divided water is for drinking (9.104). Later still in this enormous epic, Marino gives us a sense of relief, as potential energy in the water exhausts its gravitational fall and reaches equilibrium upon the lowest rocks (11.44), which recalls baroque music whose tendency to move in a cadence to the keynote (and again 12.150) has just been observed. These images of a cadence that spills from level to level also has appeal to the lyrical character of Marino's verse, rolling over one stanza into the next. The parallel with contrapuntal music is striking. Also from Marino's epic, another pictorial motif of great prestige in lowness is the height of the sun, which may be scorching at midday but serene and moody later in the day when the sun is lower, which is still known among photographers as 'the golden hour'. Most baroque painting that pictures the outdoors has lateral light, the softer warm glow that swipes a form from the side to reveal its fullness. Together with this lowness of the sun, the sky takes on a richer set of colours, which justifies orange and magenta in the landscape (Nelson 2011). In poetry, too, this glamorous radiant time is enjoyed in rich verses, with the horses of the sun cantering downward toward the setting position (*ponente*, literally putting, *sc.* putting down) to occupy the valleys and in short order even take on the shadows cast by the mountains (*Adone* 12.97; *cf.* 16.111 and 18.132).

This painterly image of visual richness at the lowest point of the sun's arc describes a cyclical phenomenon, where the low answers the high, as by the diurnal rhythms of the

planet. But for Marino, as for any musician, high answers low and *vice versa* for cosmological reasons which describe the logic of harmony. A gypsy explains the perfect harmony and interchangeable ties and correspondences that link earthly and celestial things by the beautiful sympathy that passes between the sovereign machine and the low one (15.41). Though expressed as a kind of lofty science, this harmony is based on the same sense of continuity that spells out the joy of a road that winds up and down (14.22.1–4) or the balletic movements of fencers who duel with constant rebound, now high, now low (19.43; *cf.* 20.392). There is a peculiar mystique in things that are deep, like deep waters (*acque più profonde e basse*, 17.123.4) which has to do with unreachability but also something inscrutable, an enigma arising from the self-muffling quality of long waves. In Marino, one does not sense the sinister in the deep or the low.

## 6. In Search of the Glorious in the Bass

Given that the renaissance and baroque gradually lifted the dismal overtones of lowness, one might better understand the value of the *basso*, especially in music where the melody is borne by the treble voices, which naturally assume a leading role in the music. The musical glory still accrues to the treble instruments; but the low parts nevertheless have enormous prestige, like the instruments themselves. At a given standard, a bass recorder, a bassoon, a cello or double bass, is likely to be more expensive than a soprano or alto recorder, an oboe or a violin respectively: there is so much more wood and joinery involved, and engineering to match. And with the voice, as noted, the deep notes are made by men, who in no epoch had less status than boys or women (Warman, 2009).

### 6.1 Why did Men Sing in their Head Voice?

Still, it is remarkable how often in baroque opera the heroic male roles are cast for countertenors. The high voice of Giasone in the opera of the same name by Cavalli or of Giulio Cesare in Handel's opera of the following century is a kind of gorgeous perversity, in which the authority of pitch is inverted. The bass voice is given to sages, the Solon archetype, who admonishes the impetuous and proffers a normalizing prudence to the powerful. Perhaps reserving the high pitch for the male heroes was intended to express their genius, their youthful *élan*, their *estro*, their brilliance. Another explanation might be the fetishization of difficulty, which music delights in almost by nature. In the same



way that it is very difficult to play semi-quavers very rapidly, so it is hard to sing the higher notes, just as we reach a point where the low notes are hard to voice. Normatively, men err to the baritone range rather than tenor, frustratingly for choristers—given that the tenor part is often more prestigious—and annoyingly for amateur choir-masters who sometimes have difficulty fielding suitable tenors; and likewise, far more women would naturally sing in the alto range than the more stressful soprano; but tenors and sopranos are cultivated throughout the classical repertoire, perhaps because they symbolically reach higher into a world beyond.

## 6.2 Melody and Architecture

Aristotle conceived of the world in tripartite structures with two extremes and a middle, as when a parent could either be very severe or very permissive, with a recommended balance achieved in the middle (μεσότης) or the golden mean. Music puts this classical favouring-of-the-mean to the test, where the sway of melody climbs the stave in aspirational stages and reaches expressions of ecstasy, even if it is also inclined to descend. A good analogy might be architecture, where buildings are dignified not just because they are very tall but because they proceed in intelligent stages and demonstrate an argument of support and gravity. The prestige of the high is also true not just of soaring cathedrals but tenements as well. The façades are robust at ground level, with the heaviest rustication and blocky carriage of weight, suggesting a burly and immovable disposition, very reliable and rather staunch. In the three-storey urban archetype of the Palazzo Rucellai or Medici Riccardi or Strozzi in Florence, the next level is the most prestigious, the noble level (*piano nobile*) which would accommodate the owners' family chambers. The upper level would be accorded less ornament and, becoming unpleasantly hot in summer, was devoted to staff.

The vertical dynamism of the building would sometimes find verbal expression as well. In speaking of a house on the main road, the Italians could say 'above' the main road (*in su la strada maestra*, Bandello 1.26). If someone calls you to come out, you are called 'down' to the street, as in Castiglione, where a person knocks at a door and calls another down (*chiamandol giù*) from below (*da basso*, Cortegiano 2.75). The street is always understood as below and the houses above. But that means that the lower is the point of access, the concourse, the civic zone, the platform that is shared as public space.

The higher zones are points of withdrawal. This paradoxical prestige of the base parallels the logic in painting, where low in the canvas means your space, the location closest to you, and higher on the canvas typically means further from you, till you reach the infinity of the horizon or sky.

The analogy with music is imperfect but still valuable. The building is a totality, with the higher needing the lower and, up to a point, *vice versa*. However, the might of the lower storey is not only flattered by the relative elegance of the upper storeys but earns such prestige as it has by virtue of a somewhat threatening aspect: it presents an encounter which is tough and burly, somewhat bullying, with the heavy rustication and blind windows or small windows above harm's way. The ground floor is paradoxically capable of festivity in its own terms, as the point of contact with the concourse; but it accepts the charge of gravity with a slightly grim disposition that expects trouble. In due course, the ground floor would become the most conspicuously grand, with its inviting internal colonnades and arcades, as in the Palazzo Barberini or the Louvre.

## **7. Conclusion**

There are many paradoxes in the conceptualization of high and low that equate with good and bad in complicated ways, always in a state of flux and always poetically available for creative interpretation by musicians, as for architects or painters. We will never know high and low as anything but the terms of something else; but they do not have an absolute essence, as of numbers in maths and nor are they totally abstract. They are rooted in experience and historical associations and act metaphorically; and sometimes, going against the general consensus that high is good and low is abject, low nevertheless historically achieves grand status and underlies everything that ever has meaning. Lowness thereby gains a seduction both as a support for something high and as something in its own right. The metaphoric agency of lowness is far from a platitude—as in a dead metaphor, where colourful language contracts to a sterile technical name—but is metaphorically dynamic, shifting its meaning from the humdrum to the evocative over time.

This article does not argue, however, that the connotations of evil or baseness were magically overcome by some prevailing lyricism whose grand harmonics redeemed depth and lowness, as if the logic of vertical sound and melody negated the alignment of low

and evil. Still less does the article argue that the terms are arbitrary—a typical slippage of language—and that low in music exists in an entirely separate semantic field to low anywhere else. On the contrary, the argument is that the low parts in music owe their mystique and musical charm to the slightly menacing associations of depth and lowness that literature is witness to. Low notes resonate, so to speak, with lower forces, the somewhat dire and threatening quality of the deep, which is sublime not in the direction of heaven but in the sense of the abyss, the unsounded volume that you can measure from the awesome vibrations that you feel in your chest or stomach, even if it can also be associated with a coy and seductive downward gaze. In the process of measuring musically how far the sound can plummet and rise, we mentally synthesize the notes in their abstract argumentative integrity but, because high and low never merge, we still retain the dichotomy of deep and high and constantly wrestle with their resolution. We are always more likely to pay attention to the higher voices but we musically apprehend the totality that subsumes the deep as a great sonic richness that enhances the melodic pre-eminence of the higher voices. Within that fullness, however, the sonata with *basso* carries something grave and grim through its deeper voice, florid in connotations of gloom, from a dusky downward gaze to the authority of the fearsome, which resolves itself happily with the alto, to the greater delight of the listening subject. Musical writing in the baroque which incorporates a bass part, where the main melodies are given to the violin or alto recorder or oboe, have an awesome condiment: they contain a terror which is aesthetically miniaturized, a male greatness which is ideally yoked to female superiority, an element of dread which is borne by harmony as an adorable politeness. It is a beguiling symbolic logic destined to inform the subsequent development of western music; and it conclusively reveals that metaphor, with all its vague but evocative twists and turns over time, is an ideal method to understand meaning in music.

#### **Note on references to classical texts**

Numbers to classical and biblical texts follow the standard reference system derived from the canonical editions used in lexicography. Different editions and translations have disparate pagination, whereas the canonical numbering is consistent. Similarly, the numbering used in renaissance and baroque texts follows the order of canto/stanza for epic poems, act/scene for plays or book/story for *novelle* or essays.

## References

Friedman, Andrew Moses (2014). *Momentum: A Phenomenology of Musical Flow and Meaning*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.

Gendlin, Eugene (1997). *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.

Gendlin, Eugene (2004). 'The New Phenomenology of Carrying Forward', *Continental Philosophy Review* 37, pp. 127–51.

Guck, Marion A. (1994). 'Two Types of Metaphoric Transfer, in Kassler, Jamie C. ed. *Metaphor: A Musical Dimension*. reprint, 1991, *Musicology*, vol. 15 (Basel: Gordon and Breach), pp. 1–12.

Hatten, Robert S. (1995). 'Metaphor in Music,' in Tarasti, E. ed. *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic Theory and Analysis of Music, Approaches to Semiotics*, vol. 121 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 373–91.

Leezenberg, Michiel (2001). *Contexts of Metaphor*. Amsterdam, New York: Elsevier

Maeda, Fumiko, Ryota Kanai and Shinsuke, Shimojo (2003). 'Metaphor of high and low in pitch revisited: Visual motion illusion induced by auditory pitch'. *International multisensory research forum*. McMasters University.

Johnson, Mark (2007). *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, Mark & Lakoff, George (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*: Basic Books.

Johnson, Mark (1987). *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, Mark & Lakoff, George. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press. (second edition with new Afterword 2003).

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques (1976). 'Fondements d'Une Sémiologie de la Musique'. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (2):239–242.

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques (1990). 'Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?' *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 115:2, 240-257, DOI: 10.1093/jrma/115.2.240.

Nelson, Robert (2011). *The visual language of painting: an aesthetic analysis of representational technique*, Australian Scholarly Publishing. Melbourne.

Pawelec, Andrzej (2006). 'The death of metaphor', *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 123.

Scruton, Roger (1983). 'Understanding Music,' *Ratio* 25, no. 2: 106.

Sörbom, Göran (1994). 'Aristotle on Music as Representation', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 1, *The Philosophy of Music* (Winter, 1994), pp. 37–46.

Tosaki, Eiichi (2013). personal communication.

Warman, Caroline (2009). 'From Lamarck to Aberration: Nature, Hierarchies, and Gender'. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. University of Texas Press. vol. 18, no. 1, January 2009.

Yamagata, Naoko (2003). 'Locating Power: Spatial Signs of Social Ranking in Homer and the "Tale of the Heike"'. *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity*, vol. 12, pp. 33–44.

Zbikowski, Lawrence (1998). Metaphor and music theory: Reflections from cognitive science. *Music Theory Online*, 4(1), January.

Zbikowski, Lawrence (2002). *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis*, AMS Studies in Music, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.