

'PROPORTION' IN ELIZABETHAN POETRY AND MUSIC

Walter Bernhart

Department of English, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

A-8010 Graz, Austria

The term 'proportion' can be found in several Elizabethan critical essays which are concerned with poetological issues. The earliest source is George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), the second book of which - written a generation earlier than published - is called "Of Proportion Poetical" and describes a wide range of poetical features under this heading (proportion in 'staff,' 'measure,' 'concord,' 'situation' and 'figure'). A more limited use of the term can be found, e.g., in William Webbe (*A Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586) or John Dowland (Preface to *The First Booke of Songes or Ayres*, 1597) where it is more closely linked with musical notions. This is also true for the use of the word in the texts of one of the most important English critics of the time, Thomas Campion. In several places, Campion - both poet and musician - talks about "simmetry and proportion," or "waite and due proportion," both in verse and music. The lack of terminological rigor in Elizabethan critical writing makes it difficult to define the meaning historically implied in this use of the term 'proportion' and to distinguish it from related terms such as 'harmony,' 'measure,' 'time,' 'tune,' 'rhythm,' 'number,' 'numerosity' and others.

The paper argues that in many cases, where the musical associations of the term are obvious, a form of structuring time similar to the phenomenon of the 'tactus' is implied, a kind of measuring which determined much of Renaissance music and is based on a cadenced balancing of time stretches. This form of measuring time - which can be called 'durational' as it structures the duration of signals in time (in contrast to 'pointed,' 'accentual' forms of structuring time) - is related to quantitative notions of prosody, hotly debated at the time, but is of a more universal nature and not merely connected with the reception of ancient prosodic principles in the humanist context.

As, culturally, the Elizabethan age was an intensely transitional period, from a 'quadrivial' to a 'trivial' understanding of the arts, and showed a juxtaposition of a great variety of poetological and art ideological conceptions which the humanist spirit had activated, the paper sets the contemporary use of the notion of 'proportion' in this context of rivaling philosophies of art. These range from Pythagorean harmonical and Platonic ethical views to Aristotelian rhetorical-mimetic and rhetorical-affective conceptions and further on to Cartesian rationalist notions. In particular, it can be observed that in Elizabethan England the idea of 'proportion' was associated either with a more abstract Pythagorean sense of 'harmony,' or with a Platonic and courtly 'energetical' sense of 'tactus,' or - in the later phases of the period - a rationalist-aesthetic sense of 'bar measure' in psycho-physical terms.