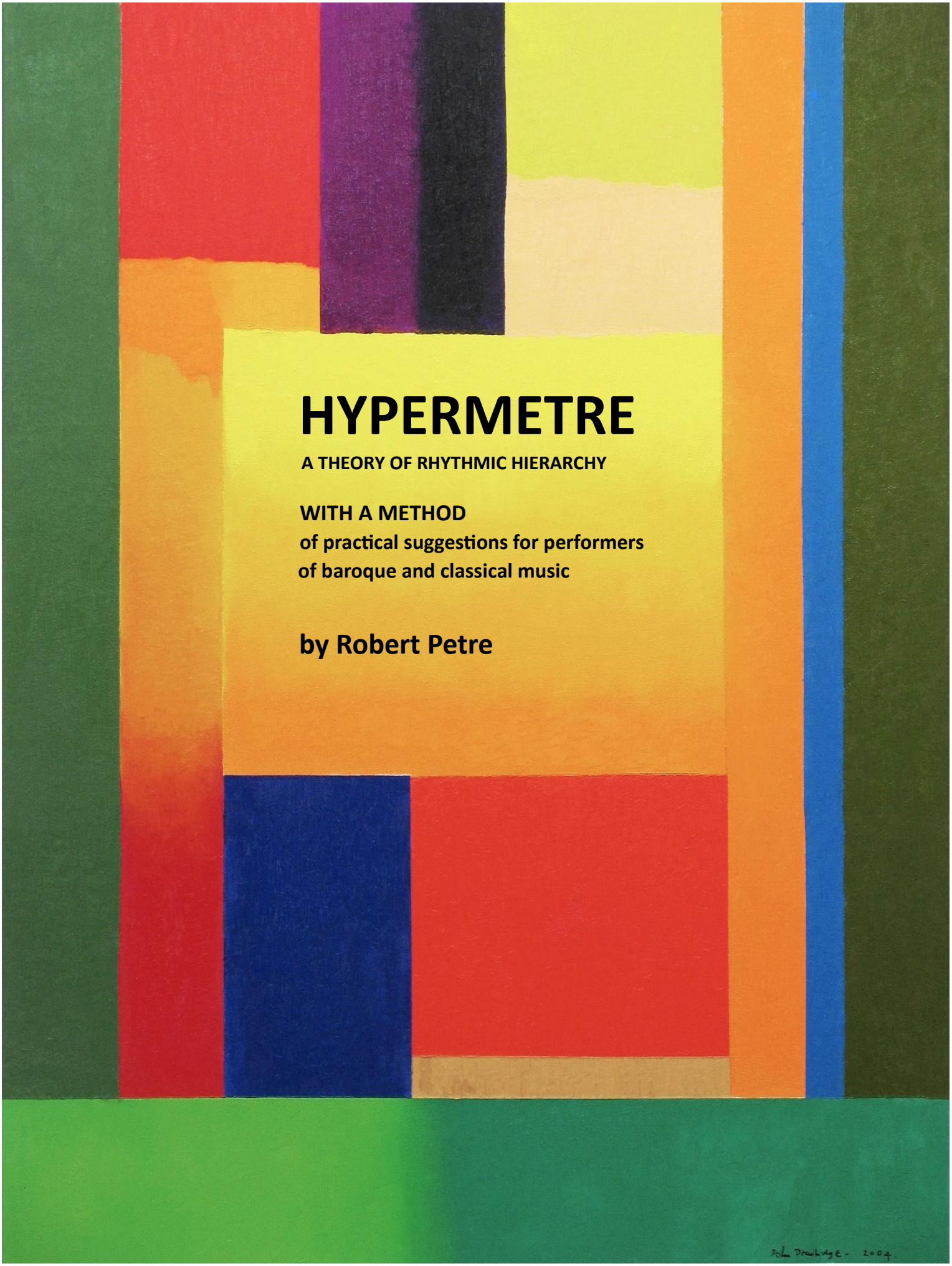


HYPERMETRE

A THEORY OF RHYTHMIC HIERARCHY

WITH A METHOD
of practical suggestions for performers
of baroque and classical music

by Robert Petre

HYPERMETRE

rhythmic hierarchy
and how to perform it

Robert Petre
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INTRODUCTION

The theory of hypermetre is simply the extension of the principle of rhythmic hierarchy *within* the beat or the bar, to operate *across* bars and groups of bars, and beyond. Amongst its proponents this is known colloquially as 'barology', but in the theoretical literature it is usually referred to as 'hypermetre'[1]. The fundamental principle on which it is based is that of *inequality* – that adjacent bars/beats/notes are different from each other, and each has its proper place in a hierarchy. Those who advocate and practise hypermetre talk not just of good and bad notes, or good and bad beats, but of good and bad bars, and good and bad groups of bars. They aim to play these different notes, beats, bars, and groups in such a way as to reflect their position in the hierarchy, to establish or reinforce an underlying rhythmic structure and grammar within which further patternings of other elements or parameters operate. This goes well beyond a simple theoretical principle of metre, to a fundamental conception of the way rhythm works to shape, inform, and communicate music for both performers and audiences. In practical terms, awareness of hypermetre can radically improve flow, pulse and ensemble in performance.

Although this theory centres on the baroque & classical period (i.e. European music of the late 16th to early 19th centuries) it is relevant and applicable in varying degrees to earlier & later musics. In the 21st century we cannot rely on instinct or 'natural musical talent' to play this music as it was conceived and originally heard – the intervening centuries have changed the fundamental concepts of language, knowledge and experience on which the music is built. This text attempts to point in the direction of reconnecting with those earlier concepts.

A bias towards the keyboard may be detected in what follows, and it is undeniable that continuo players in an ensemble have the triple advantage of focus on the bass line, detailed awareness of the harmony, and (usually) a view of the full score. String players have been kept in mind throughout. Of wind players' breathing and tonguing I have less knowledge, but all the remarks on rhythm and articulation apply equally to them – likewise to singers, some of whom fear (unnecessarily) that their allegiance to the text may be compromised by a focus on rhythmic structures which should inform and underlie all other parameters.

No doubt parts of this text will seem to some readers alternately basic, obvious, pedantic, opinionated, or far-fetched. It began with notes made for my own use with no intention of publication, and simply represents my current ideas after 40 years of thinking about, listening to, teaching, and playing this music. It makes no attempt at the proper apparatus of strict academic work, although sources and influences are cited where possible. It is intended to support and be useful in the business of practical music-making, and part of my reluctance to disseminate the theory in this written form comes from my belief that much of it may make little sense if removed from that practical context. It needs the constant reinforcement of aural example, for which the few notated examples here are a very poor substitute. All the musicians, dancers, and teachers I have worked with have contributed to it in some way; above all, I acknowledge the essential contribution of Bronwen Pugh. She may not agree with every aspect, but all of it has undergone her rigorous scrutiny and musical judgement.

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