

What did C and C mean to Bach?

NBA KB II/4 *Johannes-Passion* (1974 – Arthur Mendel) p. 186:

In the comparison between the autograph score (A) and the original parts (B) (the numbers after the B refer to specific parts and the superscript Roman numerals to versions of the SJP; while the copyists are also often referred to by numbers and/or letters), Mendel comments as follows:

In A und B 14^{III} kommt C niemals vor; in B 5 niemals C (also statt dessen immer C). Zwischen diesen beiden Extremen sind viele Zwischenstufen unter den Quellen vertreten, ohne daß man sie irgendwie zu verständlichen Gruppen ordnen könnte. Es scheint vielmehr, als sei das Hinzufügen bzw. Weglassen des Strichs oft nur eine Sache der persönlichen Schreibgewohnheit gewesen. Auch andere Formen sind nur so zu erklären: Anon. Ic setzt fast immer einen kurzen senkrechten Strich in den Halbkreis; Anon. II verziert das Zeichen C oft durch einen Punkt in der Mitte des senkrechten Strichs; J. C. F. Bach zieht manchmal einen senkrechten Strich durch die obere Hälfte des Halbkreises.

Zu Satz 12^b, dem einzigen in geradem Takt geschriebenen Satz, in dem man ein C für wahrscheinlich halten möchte, hat keine einzige Quelle eine neue Taktvorzeichnung, die meisten aber die Bezeichnung *allegro*, während zu Satz 12^a nur einige Stimmen (weniger als z. B. zum Satz 1^{II}) C haben. Zum Anfang des Satzes 30 dagegen, der in fast allen beteiligten Stimmen *adagio* oder *molt' adagio* bezeichnet ist, haben mehrere pausierende Stimmen C . Einzelheiten über beide Sätze werden unten (zu den einzelnen Sätzen) mitgeteilt.

Aus den Unterschieden zwischen diesen verschiedenen Formen des C – bzw. C - Zeichens kann man also offenbar weder für das Zeitmaß bzw. die metrische Natur der Sätze noch für die Abhängigkeit der Quellen irgendwelche Folgerungen ziehen.

[In the autograph score (A) and the original part B 14^{III} (the Soprano Concertante part which is considered to be part of the third version of the SJP), the time signature \mathbb{C} never appears while in the original part B 5 (the first violin part from the first version of the SJP) never uses the time signature \mathbb{C} (in place of \mathbb{C} it always uses \mathbb{C}). Between these two extremes there can be found in the original sources representatives for varying stages which cannot be categorized into any meaningful groups. It appears more as if the addition or, as the case may be, the omission of the vertical line was often only a matter of personal preference or writing habit. Other forms of the \mathbb{C} or \mathbb{C} time signatures also can only be explained in this way: the copyist, Anonymous Ic almost always puts a short vertical line within the half circle; Anonymous II often decorates the \mathbb{C} with a dot in the middle of the vertical line; and J. C. F. Bach sometimes draws a vertical line only through the upper half of the half circle.

In regard to movement 12^b (the second section of this movement as set by the NBA), the only movement that is written out with an ‘even’ number as 2/2 where a \mathbb{C} time signature would most likely be expected, not a single one of all the key sources for this movement has a new time signature, but instead most of them are marked as *allegro*, while for the first part of this movement, 12^a, only a few parts have a \mathbb{C} (less than, for example for movement 1 for the SJP second version). In contrast, the beginning of movement 30, which has the marking *adagio* or *molt’ adagio* in almost all of the parts involved, has a \mathbb{C} time signature for several of the parts that are marked *tacet*. Details regarding both of these movements will be given below where these individual movements are discussed.

From these differences between (the use of) the various forms of the \mathbb{C} - or \mathbb{C} -symbols (to represent the time signatures involved) it is apparently impossible to draw any conclusions concerning the tempo or, as the case may be, the metric nature of the movements involved, nor can the dependence of one source upon another be determined by the use of these time-signature symbols.]

Other important contemporary sources

1. From Friedrich Erhard Niedt's *Musikalische Handleitung*, Part 1, Hamburg, 1710, Chapter 4:

CAP. IV.

Von dem Tact oder Mensur.

Davon sollen allhie nicht viel Worte gemacht werden / denn es wird von mir præsupponiret / daß der da anfangen will den General-Bafs zu lernen...den Unterscheid des Tacts wissen müsse.

Dieses soll ein Scholar in acht nehmen / daß heutiges Tages ein schlechter Tact auff zweyerley Manier gezeichnet stehet / als:

C and/or 2

Die andere Art wird gebraucht / von denen Franzosen / in solchen Stücken / welche frisch und geschwind sollen gespielt werden. Die Italiäner und Teutschen aber bleiben meistens in geistlichen Kirchen-Sachen bey der ersten Art / und führen einen langsamen gravitætischen Tact: soll es geschwinde gehen so setzet der Componist ausdrücklich darunter: allegro, oder presto; soll es langsam gehen / wird es mit dem darunter gesetzten: adagio oder lento angedeutet; soll das Stück frisch und starck gespielt werden / setzet man forte darunter / im Gegentheil / wann es schwach und sachte soll gespielt werden / wird darunter geschrieben piano, und in andern Sachen weiß ein guter Meister schon vorher / welche Stücke einen langsamen oder geschwinden Tact erfodern / als zum Exempel: In einer Französischen Sonata wird der schlechte Tact in der Ouverture langsam gespielt / in der Entreè, und Gavotte etwas geschwinder / in dem Ballo noch hurtiger / und in der Boureè am allerschneldesten / die Aria hingegen aber zimlich langsam. In dem Tripel-Tact hat eine Menuet einen geschwindern Gang / als die Sarabande, welche gravitætisch und langsam gehen muß; Die Gigue aber kompt gemeiniglich zuletzt etwas frisch und geschwinde. Dieses wenige will ich nur erinnert haben / wer Lust zu lernen hat wird das übrige ex usu schon leichtlich fassen.

[Chapter 4

About Beating Time or Time Signatures.

This subject will be treated here with only a few words since I will assume that anyone who wants to begin learning basso continuo would have to know...{among other items listed here} the different time signatures or ways of beating time.

This is what a student should pay attention to: today a simple time measurement can be indicated in two ways: either with a **C** or a **2**.

The second designation **2** is used by the French for such compositions which should be played freshly and quickly. The Italians and Germans, however, mainly in the performance of church compositions, usually prefer the first time signature **C**. These they then perform with a slow, solemn beat. If the tempo should be faster, then the composer will expressly indicate this with the indication *allegro* or *presto*; if a slower tempo is desired, then the words *adagio* or *lento* will be used. If the piece should be played with a brisk, but strong tempo, a *forte* will be placed under the notes; while in, contrast, if it should be performed with less intensity and softly, a *piano* will be written under them. Otherwise {in other compositions where these tempo and dynamic indications do not appear}, a good master will already know in advance which compositions demand a slow or fast tempo. For example, in a French *Sonata*, the *Ouverture* has a simple, slow beat; the *Entree* and *Gavotte* are a little faster; the *Ballo* even faster and the *Bouree* the fastest of all. In contrast, the *Aria* is rather slow. In the triple-time measurements, a *Minuet* has a faster pace than the *Sarabande* which needs to move forward solemnly and slowly. But the *Gigue* finally is played in a somewhat brisk and quick manner. These are the few things that I want to mention; whoever wants to learn can easily grasp whatever else needs to be learned from gaining {performance} experience.]

2. From Johann David Heinichen's *Neu erfundene und Gründliche Anweisung...zu vollkommener Erlernung des General-Basses*, Hamburg, 1711, p. 66:

In his illustrations for continuo practice, Heinichen frequently writes out the notes for the right hand on a separate staff placed above the figured bass line located below it. Usually the time signatures for both staves agree, i.e., C above and C below or 2 above and 2 below; however on p. 66, without any explanation, a C is placed in the top staff and a C time signature appears for the figured bass line. Nowhere else in this book does the C appear and if the illustrations include both keyboard staves, they are always identical.

3. From Johann Mattheson's *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre*, Part 1, Hamburg, 1713, Chapter 3, p. 77:

Vom Tacte insonderheit.

§. 3.

Egale oder gerade Masuren sind neumerley:

2, 2/4, C, 6/4, 6/8, 12/4, 12/8, 12/16, 12/24

[About beating time or time measurement in particular.

There are nine types of 'equal' or even-numbered time signatures.]

4. From Johann Gottfried Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon oder Musicalische Bibliothec*, Leipzig, 1732:

The entries found on p. 598:

Tempo maggiore (ital.) Temps majeur (gall.) wird durch ein C angedeutet, welches andeutet, daß alle Noten nur die Helffte ihres ordentlichen valoris gelten.

Tempo minore it. ordinario (ital.) Temps mineur (gall.) wird durch ein C angezeigt, welches bedeutet, daß alle Noten in ihrer natürlichen und gewöhnlichen Geltung executirt werden sollen.

[*Tempo maggiore (Italian) Temps majeur (French)* is indicated by means of a C which signifies that all the notes will receive only half of their regular value.

[*Tempo minore it. ordinario (Italian) Temps mineur (French)* is indicated by a **C**, meaning that all the notes should be played according to the natural or normal value.]

5. From Johann Mattheson's *Kleine General-Baß-Schule*, Hamburg, 1734, p. 93:

The same series as in the book directly above, but with a definition for each and a footnote to the **C** symbol:

2 = **Tact von zwey halben**. [a beat encompassing two half-notes]

2/4 = **zwey-viertel-Tact**. [two-quarter time or beat]

C = **vier-viertel-Tact** [four-quarter time] etc. for the remainder of the series

The **C** time signature has the following footnote attached to it:

Wenn dieses Zeichen von oben her also durchstrichen wird C, alsdenn bedeutet es, daß man die Noten um die Helffte geschwinder oder hurtiger spielen müsse, als sonst.

[If a {vertical} line is drawn through the **C** from above it and extending below it to create a **Ⓒ**, then this will mean that the notes will have to be played half again as fast as otherwise {with only the **C** time signature}.]

Some questions raised concerning the above

1. The SJP versions are given as follows:

- a. Version I (Fassung I) April 7, 1724
- b. Version II (Fassung II) March 30, 1725
- c. Version III (Fassung III) April 11, 1732
- d. Version IV (Fassung IV) April 4, 1749

Mendel had uncovered numerous discrepancies in the use of the **Ⓒ** and **C** time signatures between the first and third versions of the SJP. This vacillation between various forms of these symbols may indicate a period of confusion as their usage was becoming more fixed in favor of a clear distinction. Of course, this apparently unclear usage might also be due to careless errors which were left unchecked. Mendel's assessment of the significance of these unresolved

differences in his final paragraph is worth serious consideration. It would appear that these symbols are not reliable tempo indicators and that the determination of the correct tempo would have to be derived from other factors which are presented in the movements involved.

2. The chronological development of the distinction between these two symbols as based upon documentation provided by publications by important musicians during Bach's lifetime seems to indicate a slow acceptance of a meaningful and definite contrast between these time-signature symbols.

Niedt (1710) seems to find a cultural difference (French vs. Italian, German) in their usage while acknowledging that other tempo indications could easily override the time signatures that were given.

Heinichen (1711) may serve as an example for the confusion or lack of clarity in the distinction between these two symbols; or, if his single illustration of cut-time may simply be attributed to an uncorrected error, he may give evidence to the fact that the cut-time tempo indicator was a relatively rare occurrence in German music at the time.

Mattheson's (1713) omission of the C time signature among a list of all the even-numbered signatures in common use would seem to confirm that it was not generally recognized as an acceptable symbol.

Bach's (1723-1732) not yet fully explained acceptance of the variations of the C time signatures without making a clear distinction in all cases could possibly indicate that a clear difference between C and C had not been firmly established in his performance practices (he probably relied upon verbal directions or used other means to convey the correct tempo to his musical groups. [There is another reference to this problem in a footnote in an NBA KB volume. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find it again. If I remember correctly, it also involved a similar situation that the editors encountered when comparing the original parts (of a cantata, I believe) which revealed contradictions that could not be explained in any other way than that Bach's usage of the symbols was still in a state of flux before eventually being resolved into a clearer definition as time progressed.]

Walther's (1732) definition of these two terms/symbols, possibly written in collaboration with Bach, seems to be absolutely unequivocal and leaves little room for doubting this clear distinction could be expressed in any other way.

Mattheson's (1734) repetition of the series of 'even-numbered' time signatures still relegates the C symbol to a footnote explaining it as a variant of the C symbol which he had already explained two decades earlier in his 1713 publication. However, the definitions of both symbols clearly reecho Walther's definitions published two years earlier.