

Some Thoughts on the B-A-C-H Motif in
Several Canonic Variations on the Christmas Chorale

“Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her”

BWV 769/769a

Sources:

pp. 86-101, Hans Klotz, *NBA KB IV/2* (Bärenreiter, 1957).

pp. 512-524, Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* 2nd Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

In June 1747 Bach presented the printed version [known as the *Stichfassung*] of the *Canonic Variations* BWV 769 as part of his expected admission to Mizler’s *Society for the Musical Sciences*. This was one of two versions recognized by the NBA which prints both in *NBA IV/2* as BWV 769 [*Stichfassung*] and BWV 769a which is based mainly on Bach’s autograph [*MS P 271*], but also shows changes and additions not in the *Stichfassung*.

One of obvious differences between the two versions is found in the sequence of movements. While the *Stichfassung* BWV 769, normally considered to be the final stage, has the established order from variations 1 through 5, the generally earlier BWV 769a has them arranged differently: 1, 2, 5, 3, 4. The problem here is that it cannot be determined with absolute certainty what state Bach’s manuscript was in before the printed version appeared. He may have presented a clean copy to the society but then still continued revising his composing score and making additions after publication of the engraved version. What is interesting from the standpoint of the B-A-C-H motif ‘signature’ is that it occurs only toward the end of movements 4 and 5, both of which serve under different circumstances as the final movement for the Canonic Variation. This change of sequence has led to speculation about the reason for this. Hans Klotz argues this way: In Bach’s necrologue (obituary notice), the authors state that: *Zur Societät hat er den Choral geliefert: Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her, vollständig ausgearbeitet, der hernach in Kupfer gestochen worden.* [He {Bach} has presented in a completely finished state{worked out thoroughly} the chorale “Vom Himmel hoch da komm

ich her". This work was then engraved in copper afterwards.] This might imply that Bach at one point had a version without the 5th *Variatio*, a version that consisted only of Variations 1 through 4. This might explain why the 4th *Variatio* also contained Bach's 'signature' of the B-A-C-H motif near the end of it. Bach may then have decided to add another variation (5) when it became clear that he would become a member of Mizler's society. In Klotz's own words:

...vielleicht aber auch bestand das Werk vorher nur aus den Sätzen 1-4 (Kontrapunktkanons) und erhielt erst vor der Überreichung seine »vollständige Ausarbeitung« durch Hinzufügen der 5. Variation mit den vier c.f.-Kanons; das würde erklären, daß nicht nur die fünfte, sondern auch schon die vierte Variation am Schluß durch die Töne B-A-C-H »signiert« ist. (p. 86)

...perhaps it is also possible that this work originally consisted only of movements 1-4 (the contrapuntal canons) and reached its final stage just before the presentation when it 'had been completely worked out to its conclusion' through the addition of the 5th variation with the four *cantus firmus* canons; that would explain why not only the fifth one but also the fourth variation has Bach's 'signature' in notes/tones representing B-A-C-H. (p. 86)

The interesting aspect to all of this is that there might appear to be a definite intention on Bach's part to embed his 'musical' signature toward the end of the 4th variation when this at first appeared to be the conclusion, but then, upon further consideration he decided to include an additional variation or at least extend the one that might have been the original movement 5 in the earlier sequence so that it could serve as a fitting culmination of his efforts to demonstrate his artistic skill.

Einige kanonische Veränderungen über das Weihnachtslied
 "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her"
 für die Orgel mit zwei Klavieren und dem Pedal.
 Stichfassung BWV 769

Einige kanonische Veränderungen über das Weihnachtslied
 Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her
 für die Orgel mit zwei Klavieren und dem Pedal
 Stichfassung BWV 769

Variatio 4

Einige kanonische Veränderungen über das Weihnachtslied
Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her
für die Orgel mit zwei Klavieren und dem Pedal
Stichfassung BWV 769

Variatio 4
20

Orgel

Pedal

Org.

B A C H

transposed