

Johann Sebastian Bach 1685–1750

Die Kunst der Fuge
Einige canonische Veränderungen über das Weynacht-Lied *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her*
Musikalisches Opfer
Fuga a 3 soggetti (fragment)

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Die Kunst der Fuge: a never-ending history of misunderstandings

In 1739 Bach probably had the opportunity to read a copy of Mattheson's treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* at the printer's workshop in Leipzig where the book was going through the press. In one passage Mattheson lamented the fact that the most gifted *Fugenmeister* living in Germany, Herr Sebastian Bach, the Leipzig *Director Musices*, had not yet published a single collection that could display to a wider public his astonishing skills as a master of counterpoint and composer of fugues. Shortly afterwards, perhaps partially prompted by his colleague's words, Bach began to assemble what today we know as *Die Kunst der Fuge*, a project completed in the early 1740s in the first manuscript version. Somewhat later, in the period preceding his death, the *Kantor* decided to publish the work in an expanded and profoundly revised form, though he failed to complete the preparation of the volume that was to be printed using the technique of copper-plate engraving. The discovery in Kiev of a notebook of contrapuntal studies compiled by both Johann Sebastian and his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann in the second half of the 1730s would seem to identify the earliest form of the subject on which the cycle is based. The original manuscript, like the posthumous printed edition, used the classic international format of 'keyboard score', a tradition that was inaugurated in the later Renaissance in Italy and was particularly suited to the strict polyphonic music composed for performance on keyboard instruments. All the misunderstandings that postulate the 'abstract' or intentionally unspecified instrumental destination of the work – misunderstandings generated from the beginning of the 20th century (in the Romantic period the cycle was played on the piano and considered a keyboard work) – have now been definitively laid to rest thanks to musicological research and the discovery of new sources. The *Avertissement* most likely written by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (dated 7 May 1751, and still the oldest extant document to describe the content of the printed edition) expressly describes the collection as a practical work intended for keyboard performance and a work of benefit to the performer precisely on account of the polyphonic clarity resulting from the use of a stave for each voice. As we shall see below, Bach adopted the same compositional-notational method – that of keyboard score – in the *Canonic Variations* for organ and in the six-voice *Ricercar* for Clavier of the *Musical Offering*, thereby intentionally harking back to the various volumes of *Ricercari*, *Canzone* and *Capricci* for keyboard published in Italy throughout the 17th century. (It is also worth

remembering that Bach's pupil Agricola copied the collection in *Klaviernotation*, i.e. on two staves, shortly after the appearance of the printed edition.) Various structural choices displayed in Bach's collection can indeed be traced back to Frescobaldi's example, which Bach had thoroughly studied from early youth (there may even be an allusion to Frescobaldi's *Capriccio sul Cucù* in the descending third leaps of *Contrapunctus 4*).

Most likely the title given in both the printed edition of 1751 and the widespread reprint of 1752 can be attributed not to the composer but rather to the Berlin environment in which the posthumous project of publication was brought to completion and particularly to Marpurg, who wrote the preface and who, thanks to his experiences of France and the Enlightenment, was fond of using the expression '*L'Art de ...*' (even to the extent of calling Bach's *wohltemperiertes Clavier* in one document 'The Art of Temperament'). Bach, on the other hand, might well have wished to give the collection once again the title of *Clavierübung* (like the four other keyboard volumes published earlier). His intention was to treat, in a practical way, the compositional and performing issues connected with the elaboration of every possible aspect of a single fugue subject. In this set the difficulties facing the scholar and performer offer a comprehensive overview of all the performing and technical issues relating to the use of cantabile counterpoint on the *Clavier*. The composer (who according to Carl Philipp Emanuel's testimony was a musician far removed from dry theoretical and mathematical demonstrations and 'all the stronger in practical matters') evidently preferred to draw up a completely realized musical 'treatise' – in other words a practical *exemplum* – than to write a theoretical work on the possibilities of fugal realization on one subject.

In structure the work symmetrically orders the pieces into groups consisting respectively of 4/3/4/3/4 fugues and *Kreis-Fugen* (which for Mattheson meant the canons). In the first group of simple fugues the main subject, treated simply in *Contrapuncti 1* and *2*, is used in inverted form in *Contrapuncti 3* and *4*. The second group treats the subject simultaneously in its direct and inverted forms: in *Contrapunctus 5* the exposition also presents the answers in stretto; the following *Contrapuncti 6* and *7* add the use of diminution and the French style respectively, as well as diminution combined with augmentation; in both, the answer is in stretto form. We now come to the third group. In *Contrapunctus 8* the main subject in its inverted form is presented according to the rules of triple counterpoint at the octave with two new countersubjects in turn generated by the inversion in contrary motion of those used later in *Contrapunctus 11*. In between this pair of works in triple counterpoint there are two other fugues (*Contrapuncti 9* and *10*) that combine the main subject, each with a new countersubject, according to the rules of double counterpoint, at the twelfth and tenth respectively. In both these works in double counterpoint it is the new countersubject that is presented first in the exposition. Moreover, in the course of these four pieces all the new countersubjects presented are in turn independently elaborated and then combined in many ways and variously inverted, in accordance with the most complex possibilities offered by composition in double and triple counterpoint. This set is followed by the fourth group of mirror fugues in which most likely, as we shall see below, we find evidence of the incompleteness of the collection: lacking is a third mirror fugue, hence a never-composed *Contrapunctus 14* most likely for four voices (internally, therefore, this group would have been symmetrically arranged for 4/3/4 voices). The final group presents a set of two-voice canons that evidently display a more virtuoso approach (hence matching the four Duets in the Third Book of the *Clavierübung*). The group is in turn organized into subgroups of 2+2: the *dux* with the varied subject in both the direct form (*Canon alla Duodecima* and *Canon per Augmentationem*) and inverted form (*Canon alla Ottava* and *Canon alla Decima*).

The process of preparing the fair copies for engraving (the work of the Schübler brothers' workshop in Thuringia) and the final printing was not completed in the lifetime of the composer (who was assisted by the trusty Johann Christoph Friedrich until the latter's departure for Bückeburg). Whether or not a *Contrapunctus 14* was still to be written is something we shall never know for certain. The evidence of Bach's first biographers (Carl Philipp Emanuel and Agricola) fails to agree with what is written in both Marpurg's preface and the recently discovered notice of publication about the incompleteness of the work with respect to the expansion and reorganization of the project undertaken in the months prior to Bach's final blindness. In the printed edition we detect conspicuous errors and arbitrary additions (partly due to the need to market the expensive printed volume) on the part of those who published the volume after the composer's death and oversaw the engraving of the plates of the pieces not personally supervised by Bach. At least as far as *Contrapunctus 11* the order would seem to be original and the plates would appear to have been prepared under the composer's supervision. Both of the following mirror fugues (each generating two musically different versions from the same material, through the inversion of both the voice layout and the melodic lines) are wrongly ordered, since the *versio inversa* is given first and followed by the *recta*. Curiously, however, so many recent Bach musicologists have considered the printed order of *Contrapunctus 13* as correct. This is the result not only of scant attention and superficial structural analysis of the piece, but also of a failure to notice the original ordering in the Bach autograph (the re-establishment of the right order was instead proposed by 19th-century musicologists and adopted in Schmieder's catalogue in the 20th century). The four canons are reproduced in a succession that was almost certainly not decided by Bach. The version for two harpsichords of the three-voice mirror fugue (*Contrapunctus 13*), the version of *Contrapunctus 10* wrongly included with the earlier musical text (prior to rewriting) and the final organ chorale are arbitrary additions. Given that they are unrelated to Bach's wishes, they are not included in this boxed set.

The incomplete *Fuga a 3 soggetti* BWV 1080/19: a last work for Mizler's *Korrespondierende Sozietät der Musicalischen Wissenschaften*?

As regards the legend surrounding the incomplete final fugue (*Fuga a 3 soggetti*), this piece also – as was correctly observed by certain important scholars of the 19th century and performers of the 20th century (Spitta, Rust, Hauptmann, Leonhardt) – is the arbitrary insertion, by the publishers, of a work that was found among Bach's papers and on which he was working in the period before his final illness. It does not use the theme on which the whole cycle of previous contrapuntal variations is based. Recent studies by both Gregory Butler and the present author have tried to challenge the misunderstandings that have plagued this piece. First of all, for obvious contrapuntal reasons, it would never have included the main theme of the cycle as a fourth subject. This elaborate work includes, as its third and last subject, the melodic version of the composer's name (the notes B-A-C-H), shortly after which the piece comes to a stop in the manuscript. The work is written already in a fair copy on two staves on only one side of the sheet (ready to be directly transferred onto copper plates) and thus uses a notational format completely different from that of the set of pieces on the subject of the *Art of Fugue*. Very likely, therefore, this incomplete fugue was to be the last grand work, a kind of farewell with his own musical signature, to be delivered to the *Society of the Musical Sciences* founded in 1738 by his learned pupil (physician, philosopher, mathematician and doctor) Lorenz Christoph Mizler, before his sixty-fifth birthday when he was due to present an annual contribution to the members. If that is the case, we may plausibly conclude that the 'incompleteness' (a point that Rust and Spitta even contested) of the cyclic work on the main subject – i.e. the work played in the present concert – consisted, as mentioned earlier, in the lack of a third pair of mirror fugues, perhaps for four voices, to be numbered as *Contrapunctus 14*.

But let us consider the complex question further. The incomplete fugue was included in the edition, like the *Choralvorspiel* BWV 668, the earlier variant BWV 1080/10a and BWV 1080/18, because it was found among the papers on which Bach was working in the final months of his life. There is no evidence at all from Marpurg or from the authors of the *Nekrolog* that suggests that this fugue belongs to the cycle in question, i.e. the cycle of contrapuntal variations on the main subject (as distinct from the printed volume later entitled *Die Kunst der Fuge*). Nor, for that matter, is there any evidence that the fragment contained, or was to contain, the main subject of the KdF. On this matter it is important to remember the *Avertissement* in which the author, after specifying that the work contains 24 examples (hence the 24 printed pieces, including the *Kirchen-Choral*), goes on later to draw attention to what he defines as a ‘vollständiges Werck’ elaborated on a single subject and in the same key of D minor. Only after many lines, hence after describing the collection of contrapuntal works on the same subject, is there a mention of the final works: ‘Die letzten Stück sind zwey Fugen für zwey unterschiedene Claviere oder Flügel, und eine Fuge mit drey Sätzen, wo der Verfasser bey Anbringung des dritten Satzes seinen Namen Bach ausgeführet hat. Den Beschluss macht ein Anhang von einem veirstimmig ausgearbeiteten Kirchen-Choral [...]’.

These last pieces are expressly described separately from (and after) the fugues on the same subject. Hence also for the compilers of the collection BWV 1080/19 (as well as BWV 668 and, as we shall see later, BWV 1080/18) was something apart from, and different from, the cycle on the single subject. Moreover, concerning the *Fuga a 3 soggetti* explicit reference is made only to the third subject on the name B-A-C-H. In this respect we can say that the *Kunst der Fuge* was a publishing initiative drawn up by Carl Philipp Emanuel and Marpurg (and possibly other editors) which differed somewhat from the composer’s original plan and more generally set out to offer a corpus of didactic works on the fugue by the recently deceased composer. To these editors the inclusion of all that was available at the composer’s death seemed the best way of both honouring the Kantor’s memory and making this expensive volume as appealing as possible. It is also likely that those who included the four ‘extraneous’ pieces and supervised the final stages of printing were in no way aware of the details of the dead Kantor’s intentions. Quite likely a vague and unsupported rumour circulated according to which Bach had expressed a desire to modify his earlier plan by composing yet another piece on the subject of the KdF to complete the cyclic structure. Besides Johann Christoph Friedrich, who had assisted the composer in the preparation of the material to be engraved, was no longer in Leipzig in the period immediately prior to his father’s death. The contradiction in the first-hand information is evident if one compares the passages in Marpurg’s preface (‘Er wurde von demselben [Tod] mitten unter der Ausarbeitung seiner letzten Fuge, wo er sich bey Anbringung des dritten Satzes nahmentlich zu erkennen giebet, überraschet’) and in the Obituary or *Nekrolog* (‘Seine letzte Kranckheit, hat ihn verhindert, seinem Entwurfe nach, die vorletzte Fuge völlig zu Ende zu bringen, und die letzte, welche 4 Themata enthalten, und nachgehends in allen 4 Stimmen Note für Note umgekehret werden sollte, auszuarbeiten’). Now we must not forget two fundamental facts. The autograph fragment of what was to be called *Fuga a 3 soggetti* in the edition, at least up to the penultimate page, is a fair copy (with corrections added) in the form of an *Abklatschvorlage*, hence specially prepared to be transferred directly onto the copper-plate and hence written only on the *recto*, leaving the *verso* blank. It is also in *Klaviersnotation* and not in score, like all the other pieces of the cycle. The difference in layout must have been noticed also by the publishers who duly prepared a new *Abklatschvorlage* for their printed edition in score, for obvious reasons of notational consistency. However, the fact that Bach prepared the *Abklatschvorlage* in this way surely indicates that he intended to publish the piece in *Klaviersnotation*. Butler thinks that this grand keyboard piece was intended to be the work that the Kantor intended to include in the ‘packet’ that circulated among the members of the *Society of the Musical Sciences* and that it was much better suited to this purpose than to the bulky (and costly) edition of the cycle of variations on which he was working.

It is worth examining this matter in some further detail. Those who set out to superimpose the main subject of the KdF on the three subjects of BWV 1080/19 do so first of all in order to justify the connection of the piece to the cycle of variations, and secondly to comply with the comment in the *Nekrolog*. Yet this text speaks of a mirror fugue for four subjects that Bach was still to write. Moreover it seems unlikely that Bach was thinking of any such piece. Butler thus explains the reasoning behind the *Nekrolog*: the penultimate incomplete fugue is BWV 1080/13.2 whose *Abklatschvorlage* was not finished and perhaps not even started by Bach, whereas the last piece, a possible *Contrapunctus 14*, was to have been (as stated earlier) a third mirror fugue for four voices (and not four subjects, a fact that is contrapuntally most unlikely) that would have formed a subgroup of three *Contrapuncti inversi* symmetrically for 4, 3 and 4 voices. The mention of ‘4 *Themata*’ may have been the result of an umpteenth imprecise, misunderstood or even exaggerated rumour, as we shall see below when we consider the reliability of this passage in the *Nekrolog*. Whatever the case, even if, in compliance with the *Nekrolog*, the piece had provided for the superimposition of a fourth subject (the main subject of the KdF), the result would never have been an invertible fugue. Yet why insist on four subjects (mentioned only in the *Nekrolog*) and overlook the invertibility (again mentioned only in the *Nekrolog*) when both procedures were to have been present simultaneously and, again according to the biographers, in a fugue that was never written? Marpurg makes no mention at all of four subjects in his preface. Hence it would follow that, if there is no missing fourth subject, according to Marpurg the fugue is *a 3 soggetti*. Recently it has even been suggested that the author of this problematic passage in the *Nekrolog* was Mizler and not the main authors C.P.E. Bach and Agricola.

The superimposition of the main subject as a fourth subject is also absurd, for various reasons. In all his polythematic contrapuntal compositions Bach always complied with the rule of *varietas* in the choice of subjects. This rule is indeed a *conditio sine qua non* for composing a fugue with more than one subject. The first subject, stated with its opening ascending leap of a fifth (D-A) and descending motion towards the mediant (F) could never combine with a subject that both begins in practically the same way and is rhythmically too similar. This similarity in itself would be enough to rule out any further attempt at proposing the main subject of the cycle as a possible fourth subject. The first subject of this wonderful fragment is in fact in the *stylus antiquus*, in the manner of a strict neo-Frescobaldian *ricercar*; the second, on the other hand, is a swift diminished melody in the violin style and almost in the manner of a *canzona*; the third is solemnly dramatic and in the *genus chromaticum*. The contrast – which according to the implicit rules of fugue composition, must be melodic (steps/leaps, ascending/descending, diatonic/chromatic), rhythmic (*stylus gravis*, *stylus diminuitus*) and harmonic – is indeed admirable. Furthermore, in terms of keyboard style this monumental piece is also very different and later-sounding than the *Contrapuncti* of the KdF: indeed the first section is somewhat reminiscent, in both pace and stylistic features, of the *Ricercar a 6* from the *Musikalisches Opfer*. As suggested above, a likely explanation is that it is a final offering for Mizler (to be printed on two staves), an erudite *summa* of all the keyboard styles, from Frescobaldi to the more modern, with a brilliant and dramatic melodic personal signature displaying supreme harmonic conduct.

The lack of contrast between the first subject of BWV 1080/19 and the main subject of the cycle of variations has led some scholars to maintain that this first subject was part of the main subject of the so-called *Kunst der Fuge*. In this case this first subject would indeed be the main subject and the BWV 1080/19 should be considered (rightly in this case) a fugue for ‘only’ 3 subjects and not 4. Again this cannot be supported, given that all that makes the main theme of the KdF characteristic and so flexibly unique is lacking here: above all the implicit diminished seventh halfway through the subject, so dear to Bach, implied by the C sharp (which becomes B flat in the inversion in contrary motion). A theme in D minor in the style of a *ricercar* very often presents an initial upward leap of a fifth that descends to the mediant. This relates in no way to the theme of the *Kunst der Fuge*, which after touching the Tonic-Dominant-Mediant immediately returns to the Tonic and continues in a completely different manner. One is even tempted to think that if the fugue were not in the key of D minor or had not been included in the edition by the publishers, no one would have ever dreamed of creating such a succession of misunderstandings with a view to forcedly considering it part of the project on the main theme of BWV 1080. Moreover, from a technical point of view a final superimposition of the fourth theme in the manner of a concluding stretto would not by itself generate a quadruple fugue, as generally defined today. In the strict sense, according to Mattheson’s terminology, the *Fuga a 3 soggetti* is a double fugue with three subjects. For the fugue to be quadruple it would have to be possible to combine the fourth subjects in quadruple counterpoint (most likely at the octave) in 24 (1 x 2 x 3 x 4) possibilities. The combination proposed by Nottebohm, which is in any case very strained and full of implausible rhythmic changes, does not work in most of its possible inversions, as was already pointed out in the 19th century.

A fuller treatment of some of the matters mentioned here and of further misunderstandings are included in my article given at www.matteomessori.com/articles/misunderstandingsBWV1080.pdf

**‘Like the gaze of an old man who watches his grandchildren standing round their Christmas tree, and is reminded of his own childhood’:
the Canonic Variations on the Christmas Lied *Vom Himmel hoch da komm’ich her***

This wonderful organ cycle, engraved in the Nuremberg workshop of Balthasar Schmid, of five canons based on the cantus firmus of the Lutheran Christmas *Lied* for children (with the last piece presenting a canon of the cantus firmus itself) is now considered, in the light of recent research, to be the result of a complex ‘work in progress’ that extended from 1745 to 1747. This was after all a manner of proceeding shared by all the works of the last decade recorded on these CDs. It is possible that right from the start Bach, who had shortly before completed the fourteen canons BWV 1087 (notated in abbreviated form) on the first eight notes of the bass line of the Aria of the so-called *Goldberg Variations*, had considered writing a similar canonical work of a theoretical nature, this time perhaps as a tribute to the baptism (celebrated on 10 December 1745) of his first grandson and based on the children’s Hymn, a highly suitable piece for that period of Advent. This would explain the notation in abbreviated form of the first two variations and the subsequent rethinking of the work as a practical work for organ with two manuals and pedal, as shown by the change to extended notation in the third variation. These three pieces were the first to be engraved on copper, very likely at the end of 1745. They were followed by the fifth variation around the middle of 1746. Subsequently, only when Bach decided to enter the so-called Mizler Society in June 1747 as fourteenth member (it is worth remembering that in numerological terms the name B+A+C+H corresponded to the number 14) did he undertake the composition and engraving of the fourth Variation, notated in score and resorting to notational features intentionally inspired by 17th-century printing in movable type as a means of enhancing its erudition. The other extant source to transmit the Canonic Variations apart from the printed edition, an autograph that presents a different ordering (first were copied with changes Variations I, II, V and III and then later, in parallel with the preparation of the version for printing, the text of the fourth canon shows considerable differences, but it cannot be considered either as a definitive version or as a version that precedes the edition. This organ cycle is one of the last original works composed specifically for the instrument by the *Kantor* and it was the last to be published if we except the six so-called Schübler Chorales, which are merely organ arrangements of pieces already composed for other ensemble formations. Bach wished to demonstrate once again that in his hands even the rarest of artifices – those requiring profound enquiry, reflection, and hence practical and spiritual *Übung* – could create a musical universe of unsurpassed beauty. In these pieces of such refinement the Christmas spirit is wonderfully expressed, thanks also to the melodious naivety of the *cantus firmus* of the *Kinderlied* which Bach infuses with endless consequences in his fantasmagorical elaborations.

‘Glorifying Glory’: the *Musikalisches Opfer*

In May 1747 Johann Sebastian Bach, together with his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, went for the second time to Berlin and Postdam where his son Carl Philipp Emanuel was harpsichordist to the King of Prussia Frederick II ‘the Great’. Thanks also to the public attention displayed through the press notices in the leading German newspapers and given the exceptional encounter with the music-loving monarch, the journey was one of the most important events in the life of the then sixty-two-year-old *Thomaskantor*. We know that Frederick himself had begged Bach on various occasions to come to Postdam to display his much-praised and acknowledged gifts as musician and keyboard virtuoso. And incidentally, it is not implausible that Bach’s choice of time to visit Prussia was also connected to complex diplomatic reasons relating to international politics; indeed the visit may even have assumed the connotations of an embassy of peace.

As soon as Bach arrived in the royal presence he was asked to improvise a three-voice fugue on the theme submitted by the King, which (most likely with the help of a few slight improvements) forms the foundation of the work composed shortly afterwards. On the following evening, in the presence of the court, Bach improvised a six-voice fugue on a subject chosen by himself, once again arousing the admiration of all present, and also undertook to provide a fitting elaboration, this time in written form, of the fugue improvised on the *Thema regium*. On his return to Leipzig he probably immediately set to work on his plan, which ended up by expanding greatly, judging by the following announcement in the newspapers on 30 September: ‘Since the King of Prussia’s fugue theme, as announced on 11 May of the current year by the gazettes of Leipzig, Berlin, Frankfurt and other cities, has now left the press, it is made known that it may be purchased at the next Michaelmas Fair from the composer, *Capellmeister* Bach, as well as from his two sons at Halle and Berlin, at the price of 1 imperial taler. The elaboration consists of 1) two fugues, one for three and the other for six obbligato parts; 2) a sonata per transverse flute, violin and continuo; 3) various canons, among which a *fuga canonica*.’

The musical part was printed, using the technique of copper-plate engraving, once again in the workshop of the Schübler brothers in Zella, whereas the title-page and the following dedication to the King of Prussia (dated 7 July) were printed in movable type. The content of the work is divided into five units, each distinct in format, size or watermark. The five units are the following: A) title-page and dedication to the King; B) some sheets in an oblong format with the three-voice *Ricercar* and the *Canon perpetuus super Thema Regium*; C) a couple of sheets in an upright format with (five) *Canones diversi super Thema Regium* and the *Fuga canonica in Epiadiapente*; D) some sheets in an oblong format with the *Ricercar à 6* notated in score (an evident compensation for the failure to make an extemporary realization of a six-voice fugue on the royal subject during his second evening in Postdam, when Bach opted for a fugue theme of his own choice), the *Canon à 2 Quaerendo invenietis* and the *Canon à 4*; E) a few sheets with the separate parts for violin, ‘traversa’ and continuo containing the *Sonata sopr’il Soggetto Reale* and a *Canon perpetuus*.

Thanks to the complex issues relating to the compilation, the publication, and certain matters of performance practice and even meaning, few works by Bach have posed so many problems and triggered as much debate as the *Musikalisches Opfer*. First it is worth considering the title (which in German means both offering and ‘sacrifice’, hence musical ‘sacrificial victim’, ‘holocaust’, ‘host’) and the language of the dedication. The register and style of the language are by some considered very different from those of contemporary dedications, and

indeed particularly close to Biblical inflections. An expression like *den Ruhm zu verherrlichen*, to glorify glory, is used also in the *Introitus* of the *Johannespassion*; similarly, another phrase like *ein Opfer zu weyhen*, to consecrate an offering, reminds one of passages like that of *Exodus 29*, which Bach personally glossed in his copy of the Old Testament.

This has generated conjectures on a presumed theological significance of the collection, as opposed to the rhetorical interpretation that has been so fashionable in specialist circles in the last twenty-five years (which, though devoid of documentary grounds and plausibility, views the foundation of the whole structure of the *Musikalisches Opfer* in terms of Quintilian's treatise on rhetoric *Institutio Oratoria*, particularly the parts concerning the construction of an oration). Like the theological theory, even the rhetorical conjecture – which incidentally relies on highly contestable assumptions concerning the use of the term *ricercar* to designate the two *Clavier-Fugen* in the edition – implies a pre-established and mandatory order in the sequence of pieces. Other interpretations have even gone so far as to involve the Rosicrucian Order and the Freemasons.

The arrangement and ordering of the pieces is the subject that has most intensely pitted the scholars against one another over the last two centuries, resulting in several dozen solutions. Now it seems almost certain that, according to the composer's initial intentions, the work was to have consisted just of the opening dedication and the two keyboard pieces for three and six voices (with the three canons that follow the two pieces in the edition). Some problems arose during the preparation of the plates of the six-voice *Ricercar*, and Bach decided to send the king, together with the three-part *Ricercar*, also the sheet containing the *Canones diversi* that he subsequently composed and engraved. The *Sonata da camera* with the perpetual canon that closes it was the last piece to be composed and sent to press. In the original extant copies the various printed units are never bound together in the same way (moreover none of these copies are complete), nor are they numbered in succession; besides, on account of the different printing formats, they are understandably difficult to bring together. The oblong format is that typical of musical editions for keyboard instrument (which comfortably allow one to rest the pages lengthwise on the *Clavier's* music stand), whereas the vertical format is that used for the separate parts of ensemble music or for editions of theoretical music. The work we are dealing with is certainly not a cyclic work provided with a pre-established sequence: the editions simply present various pieces for various formations, from solo to chamber music, all centred on the *Thema Regium*. Also recently confirmed is the foundation of Spitta's (often disputed) theory, according to which the various printed units were published at different times in the period between the data of the dedication and the notice in the newspapers. Once again we are dealing with a 'work in progress'.

Increasingly the musical output of Bach's last 'long decade' focuses on his efforts to stake a claim to full membership of the 'universal' tradition of the European chapel masters. In particular we should assess the choice of the word *ricercar*, a term that was a little antiquated and almost obsolete in contemporary Germany (where it was generally understood as a synonym for a fugue and not so much in the former High-Renaissance meaning of a free improvisation). The choice of term reveals an ideal affinity with the Italian tradition of keyboard counterpoint, with particular reference to the models of the *stylus antiquus* that recur so frequently in Bach's music from the second half of the 1730s. In the glorious six-voice *Ricercar* on the *Thema regium* the results achieved can be said to conclude an entire era. On the other hand, the much more 'gallant' verve and wit of the three-voice *Ricercar* would seem to reflect in part the improvisational approach of the original performance (at least in the freedom of movement, unusual for Bach, displayed in the fugue episodes).

The astounding *Sonata in trio* – which includes Frederick’s own instrument, the transverse flute, among the solo roles – also presents graceful stylistic features typical of Berlin’s fashion-conscious gallant style, apparently so at odds with the high tone of the remaining material (see the *Andante*, one of the two movements of the entire *corpus* not to be based on the *Thema regium*). Nonetheless the elaboration of that idea, characterized by the continuous and almost obsessive repetition of *figurae suspirantes*, frequent melodic falls and dynamic contrasts, leads the musical discourse very far from the typical *Galanterien* of the time. Harmonic extremism and the recourse to the *genus chromaticum* are in fact an essential characteristic of the whole *Sonata* and of the entire royal tribute, and the natural consequences of the dramatically descending semitones of the immortal *Thema regium*.

Included in the royal tribute, as a kind of erudite appendix and pondered reflection, intended to display the contribution of the music scholar (as in the *Kunst der Fuge*), is the *ars canonica*, the art that traditionally guaranteed the academic credentials of every *Kapellmeister*. The supreme investigation of canonic technique conducted by Bach during this decade – achieved by the composition of both ‘practical’ canons, i.e. canons conceived for performance (like those of the *Goldberg Variations*, the *Kunst der Fuge* or the *Canonic Variations* for organ) and theoretical canons – achieves a masterly synthesis in the *Musikalisches Opfer*. The pages sent to Frederick also included certain canons annotated in an abbreviated form (leaving the task of resolving them to the musicians) and others in an enigmatic form, hence without any indication of the points of entry, the contrapuntal artifice underlying the piece, or even the layout of the parts and the ways in which they proceed. Bach even adds the Latin title *Quaerendo invenietis* which alludes to ‘Quaerite, et invenietis’ of Matthew 7 or Luke 11 – here again showing himself to be a worthy follower of a Renaissance and 17th-century tradition with precedents (similar in certain respects is the *Artifici musicali* (1689) of the Modenese composer Giovanni Battista Vitali). These short pieces, which resort to a variety of artifices, are among the supreme peaks of Bach’s production in terms of compositional science combined with expressive pathos (see in particular the movement in the French style of the piece *per Augmentationem contrariu Motu* or in the melancholy detachment generated by the canon *per Tonos*). Rarely are the instruments intended prescribed. This has led to infinite disputes concerning the contrapuntal solutions to these pieces and their most suitable instrumentation. In my opinion, as much use as possible should be made of the harpsichord alone (sometimes a single keyboard, sometimes a double) or of violin and obbligato harpsichord in the prodigious *Fuga canonica in Epiadiapente*, according to a tradition transmitted by a manuscript of Carl Philipp Emanuel, and in the very few pieces that a sole keyboard player’s hands can negotiate only with difficulty. Although one cannot rule out the possibility that some of these canons have their main *raison d’être* in a theoretical principle (hence the performing aspect is a secondary issue), their musical realization is amply justified by both the evidence of Carl Philipp Emanuel (‘Bach did not occupy himself with deep theoretical speculations on music; instead he was all the stronger in practical matters’ or ‘the deceased, like every true musician, did not like arid mathematical demonstrations’) and the genuine marvel that these pieces arouse in the listener alongside the main *Spielwerke* (the real pieces for performance, i.e. the two *ricercars* and the *trio sonata*).

In my opinion, plausibly also for reasons of expense, only the sheet containing the *Canones diversi super Thema regium* was inserted in one of the packets that circulated among the members of the Society of the Musical Sciences.

In the *Musical Offering* old Bach, in a sort of self-portrait, reveals himself as the brilliant keyboard virtuoso, the outstanding authority on composition methods, and the *Cammer-Musicus* who masters both the contemporary styles and those judiciously inherited from tradition: hence as a *Musicus practicus et theoreticus*, *Fugenmeister* and *Capellmeister*.

Some Performing Issues

From the mid 20th century onwards the 16' stop in harpsichord building has suffered a rejection still widely shared by harpsichord builders, performers and scholars. This widespread prejudice can be seen as a natural reaction to the practice, inaugurated at the end of the 19th century, of making harpsichords that lacked both the craftsmanship and the constructional principles of the old masters, and was instead based almost solely on the specifications of the so-called 'Bach harpsichord' preserved at the Museum of Musical Instruments in Berlin, an instrument then thought to have belonged to the composer (and hence the supreme model to be copied). Recent studies, however, have fortunately drawn attention to the frequent presence of the 16' on German harpsichords and on how it was used by various instrument builders. It now seems justifiable to maintain that for Bach the role of both the harpsichord played *manualiter* with the 16' stop and one played *pedaliter* thanks to an underlying independent *Pedalcembalo* (and hence also rich in depth in the 16' range) was particularly important for public performances. The use of the pedalboard in continuo playing on the organ was also a widespread practice attested in many treatises of the period, also from Bach's area.

Even though Bach most likely never possessed a pedal harpsichord (then, as today, an expensive instrument) but only a pedal clavichord with two overlying manuals (as we deduce from the description of his estate), he almost certainly had at his disposal a *Pedalflügel* in the places where he performed publicly (hence the *Clavier* necessarily became the *Flügel* for reasons of power and volume). In Cöthen a pedal harpsichord built by the organ builder Christian Joachim was already purchased in 1722; and according to some research, the 'großes Clavecin' commissioned for the court of Cöthen by Bach from Mietke was a two-manual harpsichord equipped with a 16' stop. Moreover, my recent article, 'Ein 16'-Cembalo mit Pedalcembalo von Zacharias Hildebrandt', published in the *Bach-Jahrbuch* 2010, investigates the extraordinary pair of large harpsichords probably built for the performances of the Leipzig *Collegium musicum* to Bach's plans by his friend the distinguished organ builder Zacharias Hildebrandt: the upper instrument with 2 manuals, with a 16' and 8' specification on the first manual and 8' and 4' on the second, with also an 8' nasale in the bass half of the keyboard; and the lower pedal harpsichord provided with two 16' courses and two 8' courses and most likely an 8' nasale. I have therefore felt the need to play some of the pieces in this collection on a two-manual harpsichord with specifications similar to Hildebrandt's *manualiter* instrument, with a 16' on the lower keyboard and a 4' on the upper: an arrangement that (as I document in the same article) can be traced, not implausibly, back to Bach himself.

When in private, according to Forkel's first-hand evidence (which I feel must not be questioned), Bach preferred to improvise and make music on his clavichords, most likely placed one above the other so as to form an ideal organ console when needed, and on which it was possible to achieve excellent keyboard performances (in spite of the limited power) in the purest Italianate *cantabile* style. It is also important to remember what Griepenkerl relates through Forkel (thus transmitting another piece of first-hand evidence): that on the keyboard Johann Sebastian Bach used all the means of the great singers, and that beneath his fingers the *Clavier* played like an ensemble of solo singers; that he breathed according to the manner of the art of singing, gave shape to his phrases (paying due attention to their closure and connection), and also resorted to performing expedients such as *portamento* and *cercar la nota*. A French witness of the second half of the 18th century presents a picture of a Bach improvising on the clavichord in the presence of a well-known Italian opera

composer who detested the instrument and doing so in a manner so expressive as to induce him to tears. Indeed when the music was over, the same musician declared the clavichord, in Bach's hands, to be finest of all musical instruments.

In the present world of 'authentic' or (rather) 'historically informed performance practice' there are always various approaches or schools of thought that are often distant from one another. While on the one hand this is good thing and a consequence of an era that is multicultural and open to stimuli, rejecting all preconceived interpretational rigidity, at the same time this is possible because we are all (including the teachers who guided and influenced us) interpreters without roots in the musical tradition and lacking a direct inheritance transmitted down the centuries from master to pupil. The rediscovery of early instruments developed in a musical context that witnessed a clear break with a tradition that had extended from the 16th century at least until the First World War. Traces of this tradition survived in the years between the two Wars among the great musicians born in the second half of the 19th century. The rupture with tradition was a genuine reaction to the so-called 'Romantic' school and it led musicians to obliterate, in an impulse to objectivize, everything that had been accumulated over the centuries in the art of musical performance (without ever being notated or 'fixed'). As it is, this 'fidelity to the text', which led to the elimination of almost everything that was not notated in the score, was about as far from authenticity as one could get. It is of course true that certain developments in the second half of the 19th century included superfluous encrustations and excesses. But what we learn from the recordings of the great keyboard players (virtuoso pianists, of course, ranging back to those born in the 1820s, for whom we have significant evidence from the very early years of the 20th century), the great *bel canto* singers born between 1840 and 1880, and the violinists and certain conductors of the 19th century, should prompt us to reassess many of the theories resulting from the equally fundamental study of the treatises and documentary sources (a practice which instead flourished almost in a desert). A certain rhythmic stiffness – that was championed ever since the first pioneers of early music – can be attributed to a general attitude shared at that crucial moment in the (overtly anti-Romantic) 20th-century avant-garde, which gave such importance – in both compositional and interpretational matters – to strict, metronomic rhythm. Conversely it would have nothing to do with rhetorical, cantabile eloquence of musical performance such as we still hear in the recordings of Clara Schumann's pupils (particularly Fanny Davies and Adelina de Lara), the great Moritz Rosenthal, the masterly de Pachman, many of Liszt's pupils and the whole piano tradition of Vienna (Grünfeld), the Yiddish *shtetles* of Poland (the heirs of the Chopin tradition through master's assistant Karol Mikuli) and Russia, not to mention France with its pianists noted for a pearly touch (Pugno, Diemer, Planté) and more generally the whole of the musical Europe that was destroyed by the First World War. There is something almost tragic about the total, or almost total, absence in today's piano playing of the subtle resources of rubato (understood as the lack of alignment in musical voices notated synchronically): a technique partially rediscovered only by the harpsichordists and then often without a knowledge of how this way of playing is attested in the surviving recordings. The loss of a certain softness of touch on account of the thickening of sonorities and heavier touches of modern instruments; the break with the *bel canto* tradition that boasts a continuous development that runs from Farinelli to the prodigious recordings of the soprano Luisa Tetrazzini and the Lieder singers who worked with Brahms and can even be traced in the interpretations of the contemporary conductors: all of this can be ascribed to moments that are historically recent yet today completely neglected. For example I have no doubt that the rubato displacements in part alignment are a pianistic residue of practices that are mentioned even before the time of Frescobaldi, that were typical of plucked-string instruments, and were so innate and transmitted *per imitationem* by the pupils of early masters as to make notation redundant. Even the subtleties of articulation noted in so many recordings should give cause

for reflection to both the so-called ‘authentic’ players (including fortepiano players) and the modern performers of the piano repertoire written up until the First World War. Regarding the string instruments, we should also try to recover many early traits of the Italian *bel canto* tradition, which from the times of Schütz spread as an ideal of the ‘fair style’ even in the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire. In his home in Leipzig Bach gave hospitality to Hasse and his wife Faustina Bordoni, whose expressive singing I like to imagine as being technically not unlike that documented in the recordings of a Tetrizzini or Adelina Patti! Bach’s violin and voice surely did not renounce those *bel canto* portamentos and ‘strokes of the glottis’ that we still hear in the ‘cantabile style’ (an ideal explicitly upheld by Bach) of the great violinists like Joachim or Arnold Rosé.

When, in the letter cited above, Griepenkerl relates how Bach the keyboard player renounced none of the resources typical of the finest singers, he expressly says something that can be perfectly achieved on the clavichord and harpsichord. On the latter instrument other expedients were used to render the same idea of a cantabile style. Today, at the present stage of our appreciation of historically informed performance practice, we are surely not satisfied by the truths taught by certain eminent (and not infrequently academically brilliant, yet musically unresponsive) interpreters of early music on matters of articulation, rhythm, cantabile playing and touch. This is above all the case if we consider how greatly a specifically instrumental approach to music has influenced the vocal sphere. Paradoxically I find that the very earliest harpsichord recordings in history, those made by the fiery Violet Gordon Woodhouse (the perfect antithesis of Wanda Landowska and a pupil of Dolmetsch who had grown up with the *bel canto* of Adelina Patti) display features that are genuinely historical and interpretationally correct, though naturally we find them alongside other aspects that today we justly reject as distant from our knowledge of the style of the early masters (see, for example, the type of instrument and the frequent changes of registration, reminiscent more of Liszt than the 18th century!) As for Miecio Horszowski (an *enfant prodige* of Bach’s music who felt the need to study on the clavichord), he offers us a vision of Bach at the piano that imposes itself for its strong appeal and rich poetry. Though we can challenge it on many details of performance practice that today we take for granted, it nonetheless displays a cantabile approach and refinement of touch that many harpsichordists today would have good cause to envy.

As performers of ‘early music’ we should meditate at length, in the light of today’s research and interpretative knowledge, on the recordings (or at least the most significant ones) from a recent past that has been truly erased. For in these treasures are concealed many of the unwritten suggestions that we seek to recover through the written testimony of the early masters.

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