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Interpreting  
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# Interpreting BACH

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*examines the Sources for the Interpretation of  
Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G, BWV 541*

During J S Bach's years as court organist in Weimar (1708-1717) he transferred the instrumental writing of the Italians to the organ. As a result, we are blessed with the wealth of his free works and chorale-preludes influenced by the rich melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and polyphonic traditions of the early Italians. The "Great" *Prelude and Fugue* in G (BWV 541) for organ exemplifies his implementation of stylistic influences gained from the breadth of Italian cembalo and orchestral works available to him.

Bach was well aware of Italian music from the 16th and 17th centuries. He had, on occasion, arranged a Mass by Palestrina for performance by instrumental ensemble. He possessed a volume of music by Girolamo Frescobaldi published in 1635. He used themes by Giovanni Legrenzi and knew the music of Archangelo Corelli, Tomaso Albinoni, Francesco Antonio Bonporti (from whom he borrowed the title *invention*), and of course Vivaldi. He was also familiar with works by Domenico Scarlatti, born also in 1685, who strongly influenced Bach's keyboard style with his originality in composing for cembalo.

## Birthplace of the Concerto

Italy had been the birthplace of the concerto. According to George B Stauffer, Bach was acquainted with three publications of Vivaldi: *L'Estro armonico* (Op 3, 1711), *La Stravaganza* (Op 4, 1714) and *Concerti a cinque stromenti* (Op 7, 1716-1721) which familiarized continental composers with his concerto style writing.<sup>2</sup> Bach's organ transcriptions of Vivaldi string concerti allowed him to directly transfer the

Ex. 1

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a keyboard piece. The top system is marked 'Vivace' and consists of a treble and bass staff. The right hand part is highly rhythmic and complex, while the left hand part provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom system continues the piece, showing further development of the right hand part and a fermata over a final measure.

mastery of virtuoso string writing and concerto form to keyboard. Finally, Bach's Brandenburg concerti culminated in a level of concerto writing previously unsurpassed.

The Prelude in G has been described as a concerto movement preceded by *passaggio* (a short section of a composition displaying soloistic virtuosity). It is important to note Bach's marking of "Vivace" for the Prelude. Performers might initially regard the opening measures as a virtuosic solo to be interpreted freely, but the "Vivace" marking suggests the *passaggio*, at the outset, must establish the motoric pulse and tempo for the whole of the Prelude. Stauffer suggests the following: "Bach may have added [the marking "Vivace"] as a cautionary note to

remind contemporary performers to play the passage *a battuta* (in the same tempo, with the beat) rather than *senza battuta* (without beat, freely) as the opening line itself may have initially suggested. The "Vivace" then, reflects Bach's organisational intention to incorporate the *passaggio* successfully into the principal section of the Prelude." (Ex 1).

"Vivace" not only would have indicated Bach's desire for a lively interpretation, but it would have dictated a particular tempo understood by performers of the period. In selecting the ideal tempo for the Prelude, it is helpful to refer to other keyboard works of Bach where a "Vivace" indication is also given. It is interesting, for example, to refer

Ex. 2



to another work in G major: the opening movement from Sonata No 6 (BWV 530) to make a comparison of tempo based upon the crotchet. (Ex 2)

The opening *passaggio*, then, with its driving rhythm of semi-quavers and final dramatic sweep of range from bass to treble, establishes the forward momentum necessary for the powerful *tutti* entrance at measure 12. (Ex 1) The melodic and rhythmic theme in the pedal serves as the basis for the "ritornello" entrances throughout the Prelude. Here again, Bach tips the hat to Vivaldi by using short rhythmic figures for emphasis at *tutti* entrances.

## Baroque for Strings

Bach incorporates two types of sequential figures also typical of Italian baroque writing for strings. The first is represented by the pedal passage in measures 16-18 (Ex 3), the second by a "pedal-point" with one voice moving away from the other, again in the pedal in downward motion at measures 21-23 (Ex 4). In both cases, the pedal is accompanied by repeated chords in the

Ex. 3



manuals. Other organ preludes where Bach displays this type of writing (BWV 543, 549) always have either a part moving against the tremelo-type chords in the manuals or a held note in the pedal. It is important to note here Bach's infamously extensive visit with Buxtehude in the winter of 1705-1706. Buxtehude and his pupils were familiar with and exploited this style, even in cantata writing (for example, Ludwig Busbetzky, pupil of Buxtehude and composer of a cantata setting "Erbarne dich mein, o Herre Gott." (Ex 5)). Some Bach scholars have referred to the movement *Il tremore degl'Israeliti* in Kuhnau's *Biblical Sonata No 1* (1700), in which repeated chords accompany the chorale melody "Aus tiefer Noth" as possibly setting the stylistic example for this type of writing. A number of chorale-preludes composed by Bach in Weimar, or even later in Cöthen and Leipzig, make generous use of this compositional texture.

Bach used the *Prelude and Fugue in G* often as a teaching piece and revised it a number of times. The latest version appears to have been made after 1733.

Luckily, the revisions have been kept in a good condition, and scholars have been able to examine Bach's style of reworking inner voice-leading through his revisions of the Prelude.

The Fugue in G has been considered to be a perfect example of *Spielfugen*. Kunze defined *Spielfugen* as "the large family of fugues in which the

rich tradition of instrumental virtuosity and figural play is subjected to the rules of fugue." In his comparison of vocal and instrumental melodies, Johann Mattheson touched on a number of elements that are critical to what might be called the *Spiel* style:

- Instrumental melody has more fire and freedom than vocal melody...
- Vocal melody does not have the same kind of jumps as instrumental. If one compares Vivaldi's concertos with the cantatas of the same time, there can be no doubt in the comparison...
- Vocal melodies must be fashioned with the nature of breathing in mind, while in instrumental pieces this is not necessary...
- Instruments allow for more artful writing than voices. Many-beamed notes, arpeggios, and all sorts of broken figurations are easily executed on instruments.

The Fugue in G exemplifies the built-in acceleration and immediate embellishment found in *Spielfugen* subjects. The fugue theme begins with quavers immediately treated with diminution in semi-quavers approaching the end of the theme. It easily represents the North German tradition of *repercussio* or playful note repetition.

Ironically, however, this fugue theme is nearly the same theme as that in the opening chorus of Bach's Cantata No 21: "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (My heart was sorely troubled, but thy consolations restore my soul). The organ fugue theme is set in major and the cantata chorus theme in minor, but there can be no mistaking the match between the two. Thus, Bach succeeds in contradicting Mattheson's definitions by setting an ideal *Spielfuge* theme for voices within a cantata. In prep-



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Ex. 4



aring this fugue, one would benefit from listening to the relation of the cantata setting to the organ fugue and examining how the theme alternatively may be interpreted through the various subtleties of sung text.

Cantata 21 is thought to have been performed at Weimar on the Third Sunday after Trinity in 1714. It may also have been assembled as an example of Bach's compositional skills when he applied for the post of organist at Liebfrauenkirche in Halle in December of 1713. In any case, Bach would have been working on the organ fugue and the cantata during the same period in Weimar.

There are other examples of thematic similarity between certain preludes and fugues and certain cantatas. The fugue of the *Prelude and Fugue in A*, BWV 536, uses a theme similar to one found in the opening *Sinfonia* of Cantata 152, "Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn"; the prelude of the *Prelude & Fugue in C*, BWV 547, uses a theme quite like that found in the opening chorus of Cantata 65, "Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen". These thematic ties do not suggest that the preludes and fugues and cantatas would have paired at the same time in performance. Cantatas 21 and 152, specifically, originated with introductory instrumental movements and therefore

would not have needed extended organ *sinfonias*.

The Fugue ends with a brilliant moment of *stretto* writing, displaying Bach's mastery of this appealing manipulation of counterpoint; the fugue theme entrances overlap one another, creating a rapid climax approaching the end. This moment of *stretto* is the only cited example of a "learned device" of contrapuntal writing (the other "learned devices" being inversion and contrary motion) in Bach's *Spielfugen* for organ.

In conclusion, it is invaluable when one is preparing to perform a work such as the *Prelude and Fugue in G*—born of the composer's contacts with so rich a sonic world as that of Vivaldi and his earlier colleagues—to examine the research which has been completed on the particulars of the composition itself, and to dig more deeply into the traditions which brought the work to life. In this

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Ex. 5



case, one must not only strive to present his or her virtuosic gifts in displaying the capabilities of a given instrument paired with this genre of music. One must become leader of the full orchestra, concerto soloist, and finally even the choir, controlling the final performance with a broad understanding of the role of each instrument and voice. In turn, Bach's sources of inspiration and musical intention will be reborn for the pleasure of our modern listening ears. ■

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