

BACH 729 - J.S. BACH: THE MUSICAL OFFERING

One of Bach's great friends and working colleagues was the master Organ-builder Gottfried Silbermann. The two worked closely together on matters of organ construction and acoustics. Bach in Leipzig and Silbermann in Freiberg were sufficiently close to one another to permit frequent visits, and Silbermann was godfather to Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel. In later years Bach and Silbermann became interested in the fortepiano, an instrument which, like the clavichord, but unlike the harpsichord, was capable of tonal variations controlled by the player's touch on the keys. They collaborated closely on the complex escapement mechanism, and production went ahead with some of the world's first pianos at Silbermann's Freiberg workshops. One early customer was King Frederick the Great of Prussia, who ordered several (accounts vary from 7 to 14!) for his palace at Potsdam. That he should test and improvise upon some of these instruments was one possible reason why Bach, his health starting to fail, should make the long, over 400-mile journey in 1747 from Leipzig to Potsdam. Other reasons would have been the fact that his son Carl Philip Emanuel was Harpsichordist to the King; not least was Bach's great reputation and the high esteem in which he was by then held throughout Germany - contemporary accounts indicate that the King having made several requests finally insisted that Bach visit him.

Thus it was that newspapers in all the major German cities picked up the official Potsdam press release of May 11, 1747: "One hears from Potsdam that last Sunday [May 7] the famous Capellmeister from Leipzig, Mr. Bach, arrived with the intention to have the pleasure of hearing the excellent Royal music there. In the evening, at about the time when the regular chamber music in the Royal apartments usually begins, His Majesty was informed that Capellmeister Bach had arrived at Potsdam and was waiting in His Majesty's anti-chamber for His Majesty's most gracious permission to listen to the music. His August self immediately gave orders that Bach be admitted, and went, at his entrance, to the so-called Forte-et-Piano, condescending also to play, in His Most August Person and without any preparation, a theme for the Capellmeister Bach, which he should execute in a fugue. This was done so happily by the aforementioned Capellmeister that not only His Majesty was pleased to show his satisfaction thereat, but also all those present were seized with astonishment. Mr. Bach found the theme propounded to him so exceedingly beautiful that he intends to set it down on paper as a regular fugue and have it engraved on copper. On Monday, the famous man let himself be heard on the organ in the Church of the Holy Spirit at Potsdam and earned general acclaim from the listeners attending in great number. In the evening, His Majesty charged him again with the execution of a fugue, in six parts, which he accomplished just as skillfully as on the previous occasion, to the pleasure of His Majesty and to the general admiration."

The elderly Bach was accompanied on this trip by his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann who later provided Forkel, Bach's first biographer, with some further details of the Berlin visit: "The King used to have every evening a private concert, in which he himself generally performed some concertos on the flute. One evening, just as he was getting his flute ready and his musicians were assembled, an officer brought him the written list of the strangers who had arrived. With his flute in his hand, he ran over the list, but immediately turned to the assembled musicians and said, with a kind of agitation: 'Gentlemen, old Bach is come.' The flute was now laid aside, and old Bach, who had alighted at his son's lodgings, was immediately summoned to the Palace. The King gave up his concert for this evening and invited Bach to try his fortepianos, made by Silbermann, which stood in several rooms of the Palace. The musicians went with him from room to room, and Bach was invited to try them and to play unpremeditated compositions. After he had gone on for some time, he asked the King to give him a subject for a fugue in order to execute it immediately without any preparation. The King admired the learned manner in which his subject was thus executed extempore; and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, expressed a wish to hear also a fugue with six obbligato parts. But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony, Bach chose one himself and immediately executed it to the astonishment of all present in the same magnificent and learned manner as he had done that of the King."

In June 1747, following Bach's return to Leipzig, Lorenz Christoph Mizler passed through Leipzig, on which occasion he finally managed to persuade Bach, his former teacher, to join the Society of Musical Science, a loose association of intellectually minded musicians that Mizler had founded in 1738, which aimed at fostering contacts among the regular members by mailing a twice-yearly circular containing musical news, essays, and practical and theoretical works contributed or selected by the membership. On September 1 Mizler reported to a member of the society: "On my return by way of Leipzig spoke to Capellmeister Bach, who told me of his Berlin journey and the story of the fugue he played before the King, which will shortly be engraved in copper and a copy of which will appear in the packet of the Society. I have already seen the beginning of it." Later, Bach also mailed the Canonic Variations on

"Vom Himmel hoch," - BWV 769, "fully worked out," as Mizler testifies in a concluding paragraph to Bach's Obituary.

The work which Bach later sent the King is known today as the **Musical Offering**; and includes a *Trio Sonata*, two *Ricercari*, and a number of *Canons* all featuring the King's Theme or variations thereon. A florid letter of dedication accompanied the manuscripts. Heading the manuscript is the title *Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta*. The initial letters spell the word RICERCAR: the literal translation is: *By the King's Command, the Theme and its Variations Resolved in Canonic Art*. The Musical Offering is in effect an "Art of the Canon", written at a very "theoretical" period at the end of Bach's life together with the *Canonic Variations* and the *Art of the Fugue*.

We open our disc with a performance of the Three-part Ricercare which could not, at least in its instrumentation, be more authentic! This piece is performed on a **1746 Silbermann fortepiano** which, having previously resided in the Potsdam Palace prior to WWII, may well have been played by Bach himself. It was recorded in the King's nearby Summer Palace of Sans Souci, its home since 1947.

We then embark on the program proper. We start with the Trio Sonata, as a "warm-up" piece or Overture, in which the Royal Theme gradually makes cautious appearances. The main Canonic material consists of two groups of Five Canons, the first, Canons on the Royal Theme, the second Canons on derivatives or variations of the Royal Theme. At the beginning and the end of the two groups of Canons come the two *Ricercari*, first the Three-part Ricercare, lastly the Six-part Ricercare.

We have chosen to present this work as performed by a chamber orchestra, sometimes in full, or in many of the Canons, as solos. This rendition satisfies our own requirements of clarity and "enjoyability"; however there is also considerable historical justification for our choice. The King had at his command what was in effect a substantial chamber orchestra consisting of twenty-plus musicians who were

among the very best to be found anywhere and included many eminent names well known to Bach. Thus the lighter Canons might well have been performed by single instruments, while those of more substance, including the two Ricercari, could well have drawn in the entire Capelle. No doubt His Majesty himself enjoyed taking the leading flute part in their performance.

The *Canon* is one of the simplest of musical devices, based purely on repetition: the same musical line is repeated at intervals, in different parts (SATB). The melody can be repeated as written, or a third, a fifth, an octave etc. higher or lower. It is also necessary to know at what point in the melody, other repetitions enter. Most *Canons* come with their “solutions” provided, either in the written score, or in a clue provided in the title. In some cases however, Bach does not give these necessary clues to the 'solution' of the *Canon*, leaving it up to the player to discover.

Five Canons on the Royal Theme

Canon a 2 super Thema Regium. This is known as the “Crab Canon” since the melody is played simultaneously from beginning to end, and (turning the music up-side-down) from end to beginning *Canon a 2 Per motum contrarium – in contrary motion*. Theme in the upper line; two-part Canon in the lower line - the second Canon-part being a mirrored reflection of the written part.

Canon perpetuus super Thema Regium. The theme, in the top line, is accompanied by a two-part Canon, lower line. The double indication at the beginning of the lower stave shows that the melody is repeated two octaves lower. The sign between the staves at bar 3 shows where the repetition begins.

Canon a due Violini in unisono. Theme in the bass, two-part Canon in the upper line.

Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente. For flute and keyboard. The harpsichord begins with the two parts as written. At the sign in bar eleven, the flute comes in with the top line a fifth higher (*epidiapente*).

Five Canons on Variations of the Royal Theme

Canon a 2 “Quaerendo inuenietis” – Search and ye shall find. The inverted bass clef gives a clue as to the nature of the Canon-repetition, but at what point does the repetition begin? Two solutions are offered here, the second being an inversion of the first.

Canon a 2 Per Tonos – Theme in the top line, Canon with repeat specified in the lower line. Here, Bach specifies that each time round, the whole thing is to be played a whole tone higher, from C, through D, E, F sharp, A flat, B flat, resolved on its return to the octave. Bach adds *Ascendenteque Modulatione ascendat Gloria Regis* – with the ascending modulations, may the King's glory ascend.

***Canon a 2 Per augmentationem, contrario motu*. Like the previous Canon, the theme is in the upper line, but this time slightly varied. The first Canon-repetition appears in the lower line, the second part being a reflection of it, but this time, with all note values doubled (augmented).**

Canon Perpetuus – for flute, violin & continuo. Against a continuo bass, lower line, the flute plays the upper line as written. The second Canon-part, violin, enters at bar 3 playing the top line inverted.

Canon a 4. We know from the title that this is a Canon for four parts, SATB. But where they enter is left to the performers to resolve! Despite its structural simplicity, this Canon, along with the two Ricercari, is one of the most magnificent pieces in the Musical Offering collection. It leads naturally into the crowning conclusion: the monumental Six-part Ricercare.

As a complement to the *Musical Offering*, we could hardly find a better way to end this disc than with the set of five **Canonic Variations on the Christmas Hymn “Vom Himmel hoch”, BWV 769**, composed as they were at around the same time, and exploring once again the Art of the Canon. One's appreciation and enjoyment of variations upon a Chorale or any melody is clearly greater when one is familiar with the base melody; since many old German Chorales are less familiar today, we first provide the simple *chorale* itself in its choral version, followed by the five Canon-groups performed on the Historic Organ in Freiberg Cathedral, Saxony, built by his old friend Gottfried Silbermann.

Variation I: *Canon at the Octave, Cantus Firmus (Chorale melody) in the pedal* / **Variation II:** *Canon at the Fifth, Cantus Firmus in the pedal* / **Variation III:** *Canon at the Seventh, Cantus Firmus in the Soprano* / **Variation IV:** *Canon at the Octave in Augmentation (Cantus Firmus in Pedal)* / **Variation V:** *Canon in Reverse at the 6th, 3rd, 2nd & 9th.*

From 1702 to 1707 Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1753) studied organ-building with his elder brother Andreas in Strasburg, and for two of these years with Thierry in Paris. In 1710 Gottfried returned well qualified to his native Saxony and set up shop centrally in Freiberg. In 1711, Freiberg Cathedral invited him to construct a new Organ of 3 manuals and pedal with 44 registers, which was completed in 1714.