

Composition as Art of Speculation and Theological Expression in Bach's "Musical Offering"

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I. The birth and context of "The Musical Offering"

The circumstances in which the "Musical Offering" was born are probably the most well documented in Bach's whole career and the composition is one of the very few that were printed in his lifetime. Today we know so much about J. S. Bach's visit to Potsdam on May 7, 1747 at the Court of the King of Prussia Frederick the Great, but we still don't know few important things about the work itself (performance issues, order of the pieces and meaning of the work as a whole), aspects that, while dividing the scholars and the historians, has kept this particular music under a veil of mystery.

The King was a flutist himself, and was surely aware of Bach's fame as a composer, a keyboard player and improviser. His music teacher was Johann Joachim Quantz, and the typical concert at the Prussian Court involved sonatas for flute and continuo composed by the King or his teacher and performed by Frederick and one of his accompanists (C. P. E. Bach, *Kapellmeister* at court was certainly among them). The kind of music performed at the King's court was, judging from Quantz's flute repertoire, probably of the "modern" kind, looking towards a *galant* style more than a stricter contrapuntal poliphonic texture. Also, the King's perspective on music was probably opposite than Bach's: Frederick believed the primary purpose of music was to divert and entertain, that music should be pleasant and uncomplicated. We therefore might assume that the King wasn't too interested in Bach as a composer but rather in his capability as improviser. Bach's concert that evening apparently involved only a series of improvisations, with the consequent astonishment of the audience and the King. At some point of the concert Frederick provided a difficult theme upon which to improvise a fugue, but after the performance Bach was dissatisfied and made known that he intended to write a proper fugue realized of the King's theme. Two months later the "Musical Offering" was sent to the Prussian Court with a humble dedication. We read: "*To Your Majesty I dedicate herewith, in deepest submissiveness, a Musical Offering, the noblest part of which comes from your exalted hand. [...] I*

soon observed however, that owing to the lack of necessary preparation, the working-out was not as successful as so excellent a theme demanded. [...]"

2. The structure and analysis of the "Musical Offering"

The original print of the composition (1747) presents two Ricercari (for 3 and 6 parts), ten canons and a Trio Sonata for Flute, Violin and Continuo, in this order:

- *Ricercar a 3*
- *Canon perpetuus super Thema Regium*
- *Canones diversi Super Thema Regium (5 canones)*
 - *Fuga Canonica in Epiadiapente*
 - *Trio Sonata*
 - *Canon perpetuus*
 - *Ricercar a 6*
- *Canon a 2. Quaerendo Invenietis*
 - *Canon a 4*

Few considerations could be made about the choice of the pieces as well as the general structure of the work. If we consider for example the Trio and the two Ricercari as the most important compositions of the "Offering" we might then assume that the function of the Ricercari was of a *Praeludium* (Ricercar a 3) and a *Conclusion* (Ricercar a 6), and that the main piece of the work is the Trio Sonata involving a flute, in accordance with the King's instrumental skills. But if this is so, what is the function of the ten canons placed before and after the Trio and after the last Ricercar? This leads us to other related questions, like for example: is the work conceived as a unity? Bach specifies the instruments that will be playing the Trio Sonata, but he doesn't do so for most of the rest of the "Offering": are those other pieces supposed to be performed by the same ensemble? Are they supposed to be performed at all?

Still today these questions have no answer, and few different theories has been proposed by different Bach scholars. They are mostly divided on these points of view: some believe that, given the instrumental requirements, the ensemble is the same for the Sonata and for the rest

of the work, while others say that the “Offering” is a clear example of conceptual music, pure art that doesn’t require performance. Others say that the order in the original print doesn’t reflect the intentions of the composer (the original print’s layout does have some oddities, which contradict the usual clarity and precision of the composer), theory supported by later prints and other documents of the time: however it’s interesting to notice that historically several ensembles have actually performed the pieces following different arrangements, in order to give a unity that was missing from the print.

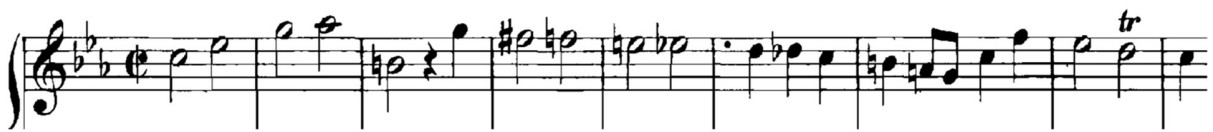


Fig.1. The Thema Regium

The first *Ricercar a 3* is a keyboard piece on the King’s Theme, worked out in 3 parts on a Bass and Treble staves. Even without written indication the harpsichord or clavichord seem to be the most probable instrument which this piece was composed for. The piece is a *fugue*, but with some particularities: first of all even if it’s a strict *fugue* for three parts, its development has a more improvisatory style, and the composer sometimes seems to write passages in a more *galant style* (see triplets figures between the third and fourth exposition, m.38, and the thirds and sixths treated on appoggiaturas at mm.109-113). These aspects suggest that the *Ricercar* was probably the transcription, if not exact a close one, of the improvisation played by Bach in front of the King.

The *Ricercar a 6* is a bigger work without any improvisatory or *galant style* licences. Given the complexity of the theme the work is a masterpiece of counterpoint and it is considered one of the highest musical examples of counterpoint writing. It is a *fugue* for 6 voices on the Thema Regium and Bach writes it on an open score instead of 2 clefs for keyboard. This is interesting because the *fugue*, as well as the first *Ricercare*, is a keyboard work. The decision might have been taken because the original royal request was to invent at the keyboard a fugue on the given theme, and writing on open score allows the performer to better understand the fugal structure.

Ricercare: the actual meaning of the Italian word is “to search, to seek for”. The first surviving pieces called Ricercare are from the early sixteenth century, and they had the function of introducing a bigger and more important piece of music. This was in accordance to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: the philosopher explains that a prelude, or *Proem*, should open the way to the actual speech. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the *Ricercare* was therefore a prelude for one instrument, of improvisatory style, which later changed the name in *Fantasia*. A different kind of *Ricercare*, less improvisatory and with a more imitative connotation, appeared first in *Musica Nova*, 1540 by Willaert, and then in works by St. Mark’s Cathedral Organists (Buus, Padovano, Merulo and even Andrea Gabrieli). The *Ricercare* or *Fantasia* was becoming a piece composed specifically for organ. But when Bach uses this word as the title for the two fugal works of the “Musical Offering” he is turning to a word that by the 1740s had fallen from use and that brought with it a certain archaic connotation. It’s still a mystery today the reason why he called these pieces Ricercare rather than the much more common *Fugue*.

The ten canons are each one an extremely refined example of the canonic art: each one shows a different approach to the Theme and to the concept of canon.

The first, *Canon Perpetuus Sopra Thema Regium*, offers already interesting perspectives for discussion. It is perpetuus, meaning it could be played without an end; it is written for three instrument, but on just two staves; while the Alto plays the theme with few embellishments, the Treble and Bass on a different staff play the countersubject, entering at one measure of distance from each other, creating the canon.

The second one, *Canon a 2. Cancrizans*, is written on one single staff on Soprano clef, and is supposed to be played simultaneously reading from the beginning to the end and from the end to the beginning. Half of this short but incredible composition is the theme, half is a countersubject: while one line plays the subject at the beginning the other line plays the countersubject that starts at the end of the piece.

The next is a *Canon a 2 for 2 Violini in Unisono*: here, while the Bass plays the theme, 2 violins play the same countersubject on the same clef at one measure of distance, creating the canon.

The *Canon a 2. Per motum Contrarium*, is once again written on two staves (Violin clef, and Soprano/Alto clef): while the Soprano plays the countersubject as written, the Alto plays the

same line starting half measure after and in *Motum Contrarium*, in opposite motion, reading the notes on the staff as if it was upside down.

The next, *Canon a 2. Per Augmentationem, contrario motu*, sees the Alto and the Treble instruments playing the countersubject starting at half measure of distance (canon) but the Treble instrument reads it in opposite motion and with all the note values doubled. This means that while the first countersubject plays in accordance with the theme, the second countersubject, the augmented one, is twice longer and needs two themes to end.

The *Canon a 2. (Per Tonos)* presents a unique feature: like other canons of the “Offering” has two countersubjects starting on different clefs in the first and second measure, as a perpetuus it can be repeated ad libitum, but is written in a way that each repeat is played in a higher tonality. The modulation is always of an ascending whole step.

The *Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente* looks like a normal fugue for two voices, but the third instrument enters on the 11th measure playing in canon the exact line of the first instrument at measure 1, but transposed a fifth up. *Epidiapente* for the music theorists until the Renaissance indicated the interval of ascending fifth.

The *Canon a 2. Quaerendo invenietis* (Seek and you shall find) doesn't indicate where the second instrument has to begin, but it is to be played in opposite motion on the Bass clef (the first instrument plays on Alto). Some performances suggest that the two instruments could actually join in different moments (m. 4 or 14) and also they could exchange place: the canon works as well if the one in opposite motion begins and the original follows after that. The Royal Theme has by now significantly changed: the incipit has become chromatic like the second part of the theme.

The *Canon a 4, perpetuum* as well, is written on one single staff with a Treble and Bass clef: it could be played by four different instruments, probably two instruments for each clef, each one reading the same melody (a varied version of the King's Theme) beginning every 8 measures. The last one, *Canone Perpetuo*, is the only one with a written specification of the instruments: the piece follows the Trio Sonata for flute, violin and continuo and is designated for the same ensemble. The violin enters in the third measure playing the same line of the flute but in opposite motion.

The Trio Sonata appears to be the center of the “Offering”: the opening movement is a Largo in two sections, with a strong canonic connotation (the canon is not strict), and the Royal

Theme is merely suggested. The second movement is a Fugued Allegro: the theme appears only once in the violin, but the subject of the fugue is clearly shaped on the original theme. The Andante apparently gives some concessions to the *galant style*, but the harmonic variety and the melodic complexity of the sequences might suggest the opposite. The final Allegro is a fugue where the subject has taken this final form:



Fig. 2. The Theme as it appears in the 4th movement of the Trio Sonata

As we can see from this brief analysis the variety and complexity of writing styles and procedures in the “Musical Offering” achieves a unique level in Bach’s production. If we take a closer look into these pieces we might find that in many ways Bach’s personal theological concept of art has invested his writing, and that in a more emblematic way than in the rest of his work the “Musical Offering” represents the highest example of Bach’s speculative attitude towards music.

3. Theological aspects of the “Musical Offering”

The work has been conceived as a “gift” to a respected King, and in the preface the composer states the intentions of “glorifying” His Majesty, but the kind of glory here projected is rather different from the conventional meaning. It seems that the music, instead of elevating or emanating splendor on Frederick, it promotes a biblical understanding of glory, a vision more related to the Lutheran “theology of the cross” opposed to the “theology of glory”.

Bach’s high baroque counterpoint, opposed to the *galant style* of the Prussian Court, could act here as an argument for a different view on world and life from the one promoted by French enlightenment thinkers like the Prussian King. At the time of their meeting, Bach was sixty-two years old, middle class, had been married twice and had twenty children, while Frederick was

thirty-five, aristocratic, had a politically arranged marriage and had no children. Bach was an orthodox Lutheran, deeply interested in music and theology; Frederick was anti-Christian (but politically tolerant), interested in French enlightenment philosophy and poetry, and in personal control of political power. As mentioned before, their vision on music was not just different but probably opposite.

If we consider this scenario, and the usual practice of the time to write music in the style more appreciated by the one who's music is dedicated to, we wonder why Bach chose this particular, strange and various mix of musical items (two fugues, a sonata and ten canons) for the King. If the keyboard fugues were not exactly in accordance with Frederick's taste, a sonata would seem to be more promising. But, a composition involving a flute was probably expected to be a *galant style* solo flute sonata with accompaniment, not certainly a Trio Sonata in learned contrapuntal style with continuo, where the flute player (the King) wouldn't have any central position. Also, a sonata for the Prussian Court would probably follow Tartini's three movements model: Slow – Fast – Fast. Almost all Quantz's sonatas follow this structure. Bach's sonata is in four movements: Slow – Fast Fugue – Slow – Fast Fugue, and it would have been classified as a "Church Sonata" rather than a galant "Chamber Sonata".

The style adopted here could suggest that the sonata is "antigalant" (Marissen): in the Andante, for example, the opening texture could be considered galant because of the balanced periods with parallel thirds and sixths and the appoggiaturas marking the end of the phrases, but the style changes soon, in favor of isolating and sequencing various elements into phrases of irregular length. From the harmonic point of view the music modulates into tonalities which are far from the ambitus (tonic, dominant, subdominant and relatives) of E flat major. These kind of harmonic licences are rare in Bach's instrumental music but more common in church music, where moving towards the flat direction (in this case E flat minor and B flat minor) is usually associated with negative topics in the text. In the first Allegro, the opening takes on the features of a French Bouree (fast dance movement in 2/4, melodic segments of 4 measures, continuo playing eight notes), the entire opening melody (ten measures long) is worked out following the Vivaldian Concerto *fort-spinnung* ritornello type (exposition in tonic/dominant areas, sequencing section and epilog towards a cadence) and turns out to be a fugue. Later in the piece also, (starting at measures 47, 68 and 118) Bach refers to another genre, the baroque cantus firmus technique: he adds the Royal Theme, the exact one provided by Frederick. There

wasn't necessarily any contrast between the *galant style* and the mixture of genres in this piece (Boureé, Concerto-sonata, Fugue, Cantus Firmus) but aestheticians in the enlightenment period defended the need of clarity in the representation of styles and genres, therefore composers should avoid combining them.

Canons are usually employed by Bach in association with "The Law" (which is the original meaning of the word *canon*: rule, precept, measuring stick, or law). Like in other compositions (*Goldberg Variations* for example), canons are tied with the number 10, referring to the 10 Commandments. Bach's canons connection with the Law is also clear in his inscription: "Quaerendo invenietis" is a referiment to Matthew and Luke's gospel "Quaerite, et invenietis". The importance of seeking for Bach has even a greater importance if we notice the use of the term *Ricercare* and the inscription "*Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta*", spelling out "RICERCAR" for the canons.

Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta.

Fig.3: the inscription "RICERCAR" opens the first section of canons

In the Lutheran message, what humans have to seek, is salvation. So, the inscription for Canon 9, "Seek and you shall find", could be interpreted not just as a practical musical matter (where does the second voice come in), but also a remainder of the theological function of the Law: recognition of sin and the need for receiving God's grace. In this perspective, true knowledge of God and a right ethical attitude are two sides of the same concept: seeking God through philosophical speculation is in the same category of seeking salvation through good works. This already mentioned "Theology of the Cross" invests from different points of view the entire composition, which is directed towards a more divine kind of glorification rather than royal, and has been employed by Bach through a deep activity of theoretic speculation on the musical material.

4. Composition as art of speculation

The “Musical Offering”, like other late works by Bach, seems to be shaped by a scientific consideration of music. We see it in the complexity and still sobriety of each piece, where under the surface of the most elegant music there are always different layers of meaning.

It was a common idea, during the Enlightenment period that music was influenced, or even structured by math principles, and that the creative activity had to be similar to a scientific research. But Bach’s constant inventiveness (and his improvisatory skills, documented in his keyboard works), if considered as a product of instinct rather than reason, doesn’t contradict the supremacy of the scientific approach: his music represents precisely Leibniz’s rationalism, where reason and faith are coming from the same source.

In this perspective, each math principle investigating the nature (as well as music) is just another proof of the divine harmony. Today we have lost this perspective: science and faith now have two different, often opposite fields, and can hardly agree. During his lifetime Bach showed a constant interest in connecting the principles of logic with the dramatic constitution of poetry: he slowly became able to introduce in the compositions a theoretic element, a deep result of a technical and poetic speculation of the musical material, which on one side was allowing him to express the purest meanings of his era, the Baroque, while on the other was eventually confining him outside his contemporary musical society.

Many works like *The Welltempered Clavichord*, *The Sonatas and Partitas for Violino Solo* and the *Six Suites for Cello*, the *Canonic Variations for Organ*, the *Art of Fugue* or the *Musical Offering* are all examples of this composing attitude. This late work is emblematic in Bach’s production because he seems to be reaching the highest purpose of his creative life: the perfect interior discipline, achieved through a stricter control on inventiveness and in perfect accordance with the “Theology of the Cross” discussed above.

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