

INTERPRETING BACH'S *OVERTURE AFTER THE FRENCH MANNER*
ON THE MODERN PIANO

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. AN OVERVIEW OF BACH'S <i>FRENCH OVERTURE</i>	4
3. BACH AND THE FRENCH STYLE	11
4. BACH'S DYNAMIC INDICATIONS	21
5. THE <i>FRENCH OVERTURE</i> ON THE PIANO	29
CONCLUSION.....	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	42

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Baroque keyboard repertoire is and should be at the heart of every pianist's musical study. Johann Sebastian Bach's keyboard music itself stands as one of the greatest teachers for any musician. Regardless of outside pedagogical guidance at a specific instrument, exposure to the expressive and contrapuntal genius of Bach's music leaves a deep and lasting imprint on all who encounter it. The instrumentalist is confronted with ideas that are purely musical, capable of being independent of any specific medium. Before any discussion of performance style, this reality concerning Bach's music must be acknowledged.

Beyond the objective qualities of Bach's music, there are great differences of opinion on how Bach should be performed, and on which instruments. Is there a correct or incorrect keyboard instrument for Bach's music? Certainly we find Bach's music at the core of the repertoire of many instruments, whether original or in transcription.

In a way, this is what pianists must do with Bach's keyboard music: transcribe it for the piano. It is unlikely that Bach would have written in a completely different way if he had had greater access to early pianos, but he certainly did not write any music for the modern Steinway. While the modern piano has many assets, the harpsichord and other early instruments have qualities of their own that are unique and invaluable to any musician's approach.

In Bach's output, there are essentially three categories of keyboard instrumentation: works for organ, works primarily for harpsichord, or the less specific "clavier" designation.¹ These distinctions are sometimes ambiguous. For instance, the keyboard toccatas (BWV 910-916) often played on harpsichord and piano, were likely written for organ originally. Additionally, Forkel claimed that Bach "liked best to play upon the clavichord," which was probably the best instrument for study and private entertainment, though not ideal for Bach's more ambitious keyboard works.² It was natural for a Baroque keyboardist to play a variety of keyboard instruments. Assuredly, the context of the Baroque keyboardist is very different from that of the modern pianist.

For harpsichord specialists of today, Bach is the culmination of an era; for pianists, he is the beginning of an era. It is useful for pianists to understand Bach's place in history not only from what came after him, but especially from what came before. That which harpsichordists understand as rooted in the early Baroque, pianists tend to approach with a generally more modern day bias, influenced more by the pianistic trends of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The pianistic tradition has come to value an exact and precise rendering of composer's notation more and more over the last century. This trend has positive and negative effects as far as the music is concerned. While scores contain inexhaustible details that are essential to effective interpretations, the printed page does not completely explain the composer's perspective. Just as the 19th century was the era of the great

¹ Robert L. Marshall, "Johann Sebastian Bach," in *Eighteenth-Century Keyboard Music*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 68.

² Robert L. Marshall, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: the Sources, the Style, the Significance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 282-83.

pianistic improvisers, the music of the Baroque era is bound to intricacies not always visually present in the scores. The score is a shorthand form of the piece.

Modern pianists are usually very specialized in their instrument and do not necessarily play a variety of keyboard instruments as Bach did. For this reason it is necessary for the pianist to experience the harpsichord and study the context of the Baroque era to give the most tasteful, convincing and informed performances of Bach's music. As with any era of piano music, the pianist must think beyond the instrument and continually assess matters of style as a musician first, then as a pianist.

The *Overture after the French Manner*, (*Ouverture nach Französischer Art*, BWV 831), commonly known as Bach's *French Overture*, presents a unique example of a piece requiring knowledge of the originally intended instrument. Bach's sense of French harpsichord style is displayed in this work, along with several dynamic indications that the pianist needs to understand from a harpsichordist's perspective. The work is therefore an excellent musical example to assist in the forming of a musical and pedagogical philosophy for performing Baroque keyboard music.

The following paper is a discussion of the *French Overture's* place in Bach's output, aspects of the French style in the piece, use of dynamics in Bach's music, and different concerns for performance of the work on the piano.

CHAPTER TWO

AN OVERVIEW OF BACH'S *FRENCH OVERTURE*

Bach published four installments of keyboard music under the title *Clavierübung*, or “keyboard practice,” from 1731-1741. In this exhaustive group of works, Bach sought to exhibit his total mastery of keyboard music to a large audience. The virtuosic collection presents a survey of wide ranging genres and styles.

The collection of six partitas appeared in 1731 as the first grouping of works in the *Clavierübung*. Part II of the *Clavierübung* followed in 1735 and contains the *Italian Concerto*, along with the *Overture after the French Manner*. While the six partitas of *Clavierübung I* were written for a harpsichord with one-manual, *Clavierübung II* showcases the characteristic qualities of the two-manual harpsichord. Comprised of works for large organ, as well as organ without pedals, *Clavierübung III* was published in 1739. Finally in 1741, Bach returned to the two-manual harpsichord for the last portion of the *Clavierübung*, which contains the *Goldberg Variations*. The comprehensive set of variations is based on a thirty-two-measure theme, part of which Handel had previously used in variations of his own.³

The six partitas were initially released individually, the first coming out in 1726. In Leipzig it was uncommon to publish music, but in this instance, Bach took on the task of publisher, with all of the financial risk involved in such an enterprise. After the first

³ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 374-77.

partita, the other five suites were gradually released over the next four years, allowing for sales to help with the expenses of the ongoing project. To help advertise and distribute, Bach commissioned six of his colleagues in strategic locations to act as sales agents for his publications. After the partitas sold well individually, they were reprinted together in one volume as Opus 1, indicating that more publications would follow.⁴ Bach's investment in this project is a testament to his determination to distribute his music, as it is to his pride and confidence in the music he was publishing.

Unlike the previously completed first collection of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Bach did not employ all the keys of the well-tempered system in the *Clavierübung*, likely to make the pieces more attractive in the marketplace of his day.⁵ However, being a careful and intentional organizer, Bach follows a specific key sequence in the first two parts of the *Clavierübung*. The Partitas traverse the keys of B-Flat Major, C Minor, A Minor, D Major, G Major, and E Minor. To continue the sequence, *Clavierübung II* adds the only two white key tonalities left unused by the six partitas with the *Italian Concerto* in the key of F Major, and the *French Overture* in B Minor.

It is fascinating to note that the *French Overture* was originally composed in C Minor, before its B Minor version was published as part of the *Clavierübung*. In Frederick Neumann's article concerning the C Minor version, he cites Bischoff, David, Bodky, and Eller in their opinion that Bach made the key change in order to integrate the key scheme of the first and second parts of the *Clavierübung*. This overlaps with the theory of Hermann Keller and Christoph Wolff in which the change of key also highlights the antithesis of the foremost national styles that make up *Clavierübung II*:

⁴ Ibid., 375.

⁵ Ibid., 376.

those of the French and Italian. Neumann adds the possibility that Bach was simply drawn to the characteristic sound of the different key for the suite.⁶ The distant, tritone opposition of keys also serves to cast in relief the associations of the “old” with the French style, and the updated “new” trend represented by the Italian style. Bach displays in a single publication the apex of these two disparate poles, and his own mastery of each.⁷

Likely Bach’s final keyboard suite, the *French Overture* has many features that are unique among his keyboard works. The Partitas, and French and English Suites are generally better known to keyboardists, and thus the less familiar title of the *Overture after the French Manner* may mislead as to the piece’s form as a dance suite. While the title may seem unusual at first, this is actually not a unique title in Bach’s output. He actually referred to the works commonly known as orchestral suites (BWV 1066-1069) as overtures as well. There are also two early keyboard suites by Bach that were given the overture title: BWV 820 in F Major, and BWV 822 in G Minor.

Peter Williams notes that the Baroque use of the Overture genre is always in the context of music in the French style. Jean-Baptiste Lully’s opera overtures were the touchstone reference to the French Baroque. This style includes a slow introductory section characterized by dotted homophonic texture with tirades, or rapid upbeat figuration, to which the king would have processed into the opera theater. From Lully on, the practice of using dotted rhythm was associated with the *stile francese* or “the French

⁶ Frederick Neumann, “The Question of Rhythm in the Two Versions of Bach’s French Overture, BWV 831,” in *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Music in Honor of Arthur Mendel*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 184.

⁷ Marshall, “Johann Sebastian Bach,” 104.

way,” even in Italian music of the mid-17th century.⁸ A rapid fugato section followed the introduction, characteristically beginning on the second or third beat of triple meter, as it springs off the last chord of the opening slow section.⁹ This is the form used as the opening movement of Bach’s overtures.

A return to the slow introductory material at the end of this particular opening movement of the *French Overture* (after the fugato section) creates a convincing sense of culmination and resolution. However, the repeat sign, indicating a repeat of the entire fugato and closing slow section, makes for a considerable challenge for the listener. The work’s unique dynamic indications begin in the fugato section, and will be discussed later.

The *French Overture*’s opening movement provides an imposing prelude to this lengthy suite in B Minor. The overture movement precedes seven dances, with the core dance movements (Courante, Sarabande, Gigue) being separated by paired dances (Gavottes I and II, Passepieds I and II, and Bourrées I and II).¹⁰ The unique Echo movement provides a lively finale to the suite.

The Baroque composer was confronted with a challenge in writing a suite with movements all in the same key. In Bach’s unusually large *French Overture*, he displays amazing variety within the suite format with B Minor being the prevailing key. The paired dances are a prime example: the Gavottes begin in B Minor, but the second is in the relative key D Major; the first Passepied is also in B Minor, before a shift of mode to

⁸ David Fuller, “The ‘Dotted Style’ in Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti,” in *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, tercentenary essays*, ed. Peter Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 112-16.

⁹ Peter Williams, “French overture conventions in the hands of the young Bach and Handel,” in *Bach Studies*, ed. Don O. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 187.

¹⁰ Marshall, “Johann Sebastian Bach,” 105.

B Major for the second; and finally, the two Bourrées are unified in their tonality, both being in B Minor.

Along with its title, the *French Overture* shares another link to the orchestral and earlier keyboard overtures mentioned earlier: the absence of the Allemande dance. In a book on Bach's dance music, Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne assert that by the time of Bach, Allemandes no longer reflected a particular dance form. There are no choreographies available for the Allemande as there are for other dances, nor are there distinguishable recurring rhythmic patterns in the dance. Thus, the dance often took on the function of a prelude-like form.¹¹ Certainly Bach's French Suites provide an example of this prelude function of the Allemande movement.

The Courante is a truly French example of the dance, as opposed to the more rapid Italian version used by Bach elsewhere, the Corrente. From the opening bass figuration, rhythmic hemiola is used extensively, serving to confuse the sense of triple meter. The low register is prominent, making the movement ideal for the sound of a rich, French made harpsichord.

The Gavottes are the first instance of dynamic indications for paired dances in the suite. Here Gavotte II is marked *piano*, indicating use of the harpsichord's second manual and its contrasting sonority. There is a similar indication for the paired Bourrées also.

The first Passepied presents a challenge for the performer with its vigorous tempo and ornaments, written in four-part texture. The brilliance of the first is contrasted by the increased lightness of the second Passepied. After the return of Passepied I, the stage is set for the Sarabande movement.

¹¹ Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, expanded ed. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 34.

The Sarabande contains some of the most striking examples of imitative counterpoint in the suite. The lush, four-part texture continues the use of the French style of writing. The movement is the center of the suite and contains the most emotional depth with its anguished use of chromaticism.

The unity of key between the Bourrées contributes to a singularity of purpose driving the suite to its conclusion. Bach achieves a great deal of contrast between the Bourrées through dynamic and difference of texture. However, after the Sarabande is complete, the tension is palpable through the end of the Echo.

The Gigue is a peculiar example of the genre with its vigorous skipping rhythm related to the French *canarie* dance.¹² This same rhythmic style is found in the Gigue of the C Minor French Suite. The virtuosic upbeat figuration of the Gigue of the *French Overture* echoes the introduction of the opening movement. Bach typically ends his keyboard suites with a Gigue, however the *French Overture* is an exception.

Providing a majestic postlude, the Echo movement is one of the strongest sections of the suite. Uniquely-named “optional” movements can be found towards the end of François Couperin’s keyboard suites, so perhaps Bach’s closing movement is an homage to the French style of Couperin. While the Echo is not given any specific dance name, dance elements can still be found in its motives. The two opening chords, if heard as an upbeat to the second measure, could imply the style of a Gavotte. The incessant “short, short, long” rhythm the movement shares with the *Badinerie* from the B Minor Overture

¹² Richard Hudson and Meredith Ellis Little, "Canary," *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/04713> (accessed 20 March 2014).

for orchestra could also be seen as Bourrée-like. In Albert Schweitzer's discussion of the meanings of the motives in Bach's music, he refers to this rhythm as a "joy" motive.¹³

In the Echo movement the use of terraced dynamics reaches its most playfully virtuosic. Bach inserts short interjections marked *piano* that echo the main material played on the *forte* harpsichord manual. The combination of quiet interruptions with abrupt returns to *forte* makes for striking antiphonal effects.

While the influence of the French rococo style is evident throughout the suite, concerto elements are also present.¹⁴ In the fugato section of the overture, the dynamic indications highlight the ripieno and ritornello sections of the form. This influence of the Italian style is similar to several of the prelude movements of the so-called English Suites. In addition, the transparent, often homophonic textures of the fugato and the Echo could be argued to be more Italian in style than French. This integration of style shows Bach to be a musical synthesizer of all the styles of his day.

¹³ Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, vol. 2., trans. Ernest Newman (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1923), 65.

¹⁴ Marshall, "Johann Sebastian Bach," 105.

CHAPTER THREE

BACH AND THE FRENCH STYLE

The representation of the Italian and French styles in Bach's second installment of the *Clavierübung* shows the prominence of these national styles in the Baroque period. Composers of the Baroque were thoroughly familiar with French overture style.¹⁵ Thus, though Bach traveled far less than other composers, he was still introduced to French music early in his life.

The artistic influence of French and Italian cultures became widespread in the peacetime cultural competition that followed the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. German courts and cities sought to upgrade their status by importing French and Italian culture. Because of this trend, Bach would have encountered French language, music, dance, and theater while a student at St. Michael's in Lüneberg from 1700-1702. During this time, Bach boarded with students of the Ritterakademie, a center of French culture in Lüneberg where conversational French was a requirement for students. At this time Thomas de la Selle, a student of Lully, was the dance instructor employed at the Ritterakademie. He was likely the reason that Bach went to Celle to work as a court musician, where he had further exposure to French art.¹⁶

Bach's obituary notes that while in Lüneberg, he "had the opportunity to go and listen to a then famous band kept by the Duke of Celle, consisting for the most part of

¹⁵ Fuller, "The 'Dotted Style' in Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti," 99.

¹⁶ Little, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 3-4.

Frenchmen; thus he acquired a thorough grounding in the French taste, which, in those regions, was at the time something quite new.”¹⁷ The court at Celle was a miniature Versailles, and in Bach’s frequent visits there he likely encountered Lully’s music played by a French orchestra, music of Francois Couperin, de Grigny, Dieupart, as well as ballet and French social dance. This direct contact with the dance music of the French Court shows the inspiration for Bach’s titled dance music. Louis XIV’s strong central rule from 1661-1715 brought French social dance into vogue in Germany. He enjoyed dancing himself, and his dancers displayed the graceful, balanced, refined, and highly disciplined style invented in the French court from the 1650s onward. French Court dancing was the beginning of ballet, and saw international acceptance in Germany, England, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Sweden, and later in Russia and the European colonies in North and South America.¹⁸

The ballet style of the time influenced aristocratic dancing in its use of similar steps and movement, but in costumes rather than formal dress. The dances were rehearsed, since only the best recreational dancers performed at ceremonial balls for important events. The dances were choreographed and the knowledgeable spectators knew the choreography as well. Besides their use at court, French dances were part of the festivities at masked balls held at private estates as well. French dancing masters created ballet for these ceremonial balls and masquerades, and had an array of responsibilities, including choreography, rehearsal, and seeing to the coordination with music, not to mention dancing themselves.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, 65.

¹⁸ Little, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-7.

The French dance style had a set of high artistic ideals, including kindness, sweetness, goodness, integrity, decency, a beautiful body, a beautiful spirit, “a certain majesty,” order, balance, hierarchy, and discipline. Above all of these ideals was “nonchalance,” aptly captured by Shirley Wynne as “an 18th-century cool.”²⁰

French dance masters were hired in German courts as respected professionals to teach dance and deportment, since excellent manners were necessary for being presented at court. Bach was presented at court several times himself, and must have been very familiar with these rituals. In addition, foreign dance masters also functioned as Master of Ceremonies in the German courts where they were hired.²¹

Bach personally knew three of these French Dance masters in Saxony, including Johannes Pasch, Pantaleon Hebenstreit (who invented a large dulcimer, named “pantaleon” after him), and Jean-Baptiste Volumier. These many connections to French Court dancing and other French influences show the French musical style to be an important part of Bach’s musical world. It comes as no surprise then, that his titled dance music reflects the noble and subtle movements of early ballet.²²

A prime example of the influence of the French style on the young Bach is the early suite for keyboard, the Overture in F Major, BWV 820. Peter Williams compares Bach’s use of the genre in this work to the young Handel’s own Overture (Suite) in D Minor, HWV 449, both works written when the composers were in their teen years. Each of these works provides an excellent example with which to chart the use of the French style by these late Baroque masters.

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² Ibid., 13-14.

The presumably slow introduction in the opening movement of the Handel overture is striking in that it is notated without dotted rhythm. It is not until later in the movement, at the entrance of a fugue, that the work clearly reveals its French overture form. An advocate for the performer's insertion of dotted rhythm in the case of this opening, Williams argues that if the introduction were played as written, with no dots, one would be inclined to play faster.²³ This tendency would work against the very title of the piece, for the standard slow-fast form of the French overture would be undercut. While dotted rhythm is specifically notated in Bach's early overture, the degree of interpretation demanded by Handel's example is striking when making an effort to understand the Baroque composer's use of notation.

The great discrepancy over the question of the performance of dotted rhythm in Baroque music is one that each serious pianist must address. While there are few examples in the pianist's repertoire as extreme as that of the Handel overture (where the usual dotted rhythm is not even notated!), the question about the correct realization of Baroque dotted rhythm has been a subject for heated debate. The pianist must be familiar with the different approaches to French overture notation, since the points of contention over how to realize notation are not readily visible in the score. The entire question of interpretation in this case involves the degree to which notation shows Baroque composers literal intention, or only their shorthand system, with which the performer was expected to use freedom within un-notated stylistic parameters.

The *French Overture* provides a unique case in the study of overture notation in that it also exists in an earlier version in the key of C Minor, BWV 831a. The principal manuscript of this C Minor version was notated by Anna Magdalena Bach, together with

²³ Williams, "French overture conventions in the hands of the young Bach and Handel," 184.

a title page penned by Johann Sebastian himself. Walter Emery, who prepared the Neue Bach-Ausgabe, believes Bach also made editorial additions and corrections in this score, likely penned prior to July 1733. A second manuscript from the 1730s by Johann Gottlieb Preller also exists.²⁴

Not only are the two versions in different keys, but they also include rhythmic differences. The upbeat flourishes of 32nd notes in the final B Minor version were originally notated as 16th notes in the earlier C Minor version (much like the opening to the orchestral Overture in C Major, BWV 1066). These changes beg an important philosophical question as to the work's intended performance: is the final B Minor version of the *French Overture* a revised version of the earlier piece with a new and different conception of rhythm, or did Bach see it as essentially the same work, notated with stylistic clarification as to how it was to be performed?

In his article discussing the two versions of the *French Overture*, Frederick Neumann claims the best and simplest explanation for notational changes is that they represent a different, second thought of the composer. He cites other instances of Bach "sharpening" rhythms in second versions, so this was not unprecedented in Bach's output.²⁵ However, these rhythmic "revisions" do not actually shed any light on the question of Bach's motivation for doing so, which is a primary question in the discussion.

Emery puts forth a different line of reasoning regarding the rhythmic changes: Bach was not modifying his works, but he was attempting to provide a more precise notation for their intended performance. This idea agrees with Arnold Dolmetsch's assertion from 1916 that dotted rhythms in French Overtures and suite movements should

²⁴ Neumann, "The Question of Rhythm in the Two Versions of Bach's French Overture, BWV 831," 183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

be “sharpened.” Thurston Dart gives a similar, if less musically attractive instruction for dotted rhythms to be played “jerkily.” Neumann notes that this line of reasoning is usually over-extended by its adherents to then encompass all upbeat figures as part of the general French overture style.²⁶ If one agrees that Bach had in mind from the start a sound and style closer to what his second version presents, the first version may have been notated as it was simply out of convenience, with the assumption that the performer would have some liberty in the realization of the written page.

Neumann credits Erwin Bodky as having coined the useful term “overdotting.” While no French sources mention the convention of overdotting, there are two German treatises that do: those of Johann Joachim Quantz and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. C.P.E. Bach states that “if one makes a rule of one type of execution, one loses the other ones.” Because of that statement, and because C.P.E. Bach’s discussion does not address French music, Neumann dismisses his input on the subject of dotted rhythm. Overdotting is presented by Quantz as a general practice of the time, included in French dances and overtures alike. And though the French composers did not write about overdotting themselves, Gigault and Couperin did seek to clarify the desired style through the use of peculiar notation with extra flags on short notes.²⁷ Similarly in the *French Overture*, the inexactness of a dotted eighth note followed by three 32nd notes invites liberty in the rendition of rhythm.²⁸ This less than mathematical notation in the final version of the *French Overture* provides evidence that, for the Baroque performer, what was on the page was not always literally what the composer intended to be played.

²⁶ Ibid., 185-86.

²⁷ Ibid., 186.

²⁸ Fuller, “The ‘Dotted Style’ in Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti,” 107.

Neumann admits to the imprecision of the 17th and 18th century notation of dotted rhythms in all national styles, and certainly to the *notes inégales* of French music. If the rhythm was “too sleepy,” in the words of Leopold Mozart, overdotting was used in some cases to add interest to music consisting of a triple, 3:1 ratio. Neumann summarizes that mild lengthening of the dot in *notes inégales* style is valid in all French music, and that the performer has freedom to lengthen and shorten the dot according to the “affect” of music of all styles. Surprisingly, Neumann categorizes Quantz’s mention of overdotting as a German *galant* mannerism with no reference to French style.²⁹

Quantz states that “when three or more 32nds follow a dot or rest they are not always played according to their proper value, especially in slow pieces, but at the extreme end of their assigned time and with the greatest of speed.” He goes on to specifically mention their occurrence in “Overtures, Entrées, and Furies.”³⁰ This advice is still pertinent to the French style of the late Baroque in its documentation of what was the common approach to the overture style shortly following the era.

Michael Collins notes that Lully, Georg Muffat, and D’Anglebert never place three or more 32nds after dots or rests, but use 16th notes, in contrast to Gottlieb Muffat, Dieupart, J.K.F. Fischer, and Rameau (composers living later in the Baroque era) who all use 32nd notes (as does Bach in his second version). In other words, notation change is most plausibly a change of compositional style and rhythmic scope.³¹ However, the trend towards more detailed rhythmic notation closer to the time of Bach might instead indicate

²⁹ Neumann, “The Question of Rhythm in the Two Versions of Bach’s French Overture, BWV 831,” 187-88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

that composers were taking care for the French style not to be misinterpreted in the passing of time since Lully.

Neumann concludes that the earlier C Minor version was intended to be played differently from the later B Minor version, and that the difference in rhythmic notation has no bearing on the question of historical performance practice.³² These are important opinions and insights for the musician's quest of bringing notation to life, but it is undeniable that Bach's two versions of the French Overture are of key importance for historical performance practice.

It is difficult to imagine that Bach would have decided to perform (or, realize his notation) in a completely different way after he transposed his piece to B Minor. It is highly unlikely that Bach was re-imagining a work of his mature improvisational keyboard fantasy and needed to re-think the basic core of the rhythmic style. In addition, it is also improbable that he would have taken time to rethink and amend what was at first a fully formed composition. He published the B Minor version to show clearly to a musical world, with its fluctuating tastes, his comprehensive grasp of keyboard style in a understandable manner. He was not re-composing the work, but he was bringing the same piece (even if transposed down a half step) to his largest audience. For Bach, the music itself did not change—just his way of communicating the musical ideas to other musicians.

In this discussion, it is important to note the difference between “double dotting” and “overdotting” which at first may seem insignificant. In his argument, Neumann rightfully attacks strict observance of the rigid, literal idea of “double dotting.” Double dotting as an extreme mathematical exaggeration is not a natural or plausible musical

³² Ibid., 194.

rendering of the French style. The term “overdotting” captures a more accurate and practical verbal description of C.P.E. Bach’s idea that rhythms should not be dogmatically similar in all cases. The fact that C.P.E. Bach mentions overdotting is significant, even if apart from explicit connection to French music. It shows an overarching principal that had survived into the *galant* style, and certainly in the case of C.P.E. Bach, one that was likely inherited from a very reputable source.

While it is necessary to grapple with issues of performance practice in the French overture style, one must also be careful to correctly identify it. In looking at Bach’s compositional output for keyboard, the handling of dotted rhythms is a common issue. David Fuller recognizes that many are incorrect in labeling Baroque works as “French overture” if any dotted rhythm is present. Usually the first strain of a French overture is the only area of the piece that is dotted, and this section has a variety of dotted figures with *tirades* of different lengths after the dots. A separate genre with more persistent use of dotted rhythm can also be identified, a more general “dotted style.” This dotted style is not the pompous effect of the French overture opening, but a more single-minded drive.³³

Fuller suggests that national origins for the use of dotted rhythm in the music of Bach (as well as Handel and Scarlatti) are probably Italian in dotted vocal music, and French in instrumental and instrumental dotted music. The dotting of continuous, mainly conjunct eighths in three-four time was the written equivalent of French *notes inégales*, which was acknowledged by Alessandro Scarlatti. The dotting of eighths in gavottes and other French dances must have been understood as notated inequality. Fuller speculates

³³ Fuller, “The ‘Dotted Style’ in Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti,” 105-6.

that the dotting of introductory movements not in French overture style was probably thought of as Italian more than anything.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid., 116. (He puts forth the idea that the opening Sinfonia from Bach's Partita No. 2 in C Minor, may be more of an Italianism than an instance of French overture style.)

CHAPTER FOUR

BACH'S DYNAMIC INDICATIONS

Common to both Bach's *Italian Concerto* and *French Overture* is the inclusion of *piano* and *forte* dynamic markings in the score. These unique indications make the two works a striking study of the early use of dynamic contrast on the keyboard. For the pianist, these dynamic indications are quite different from those usually encountered in the keyboard repertoire and require an informed interpretation to realize their antiphonal intention.

Another instance of dynamic indications for a keyboard work of Bach is the famous *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. But it should be noted that it is doubtful that the dynamics on the first page are Bach's own markings. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach likely added the dynamics at a later time,³⁵ or they may have been added by a scribe.³⁶ While the recitative section does benefit from an opposition of sounds, the dynamics for the opening do not seem stylistic, or even musically logical for the material. They seem to make more sense in light of *Empfindsamer Stil* effects used by the sons of Bach in their own works.

Bach is well known for his Christian faith, perhaps most notably in his dedication at the end of many works *Soli Deo Gloria*, or "To God Alone be the Glory." With his

³⁵ Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Bach at the Keyboard*, trans. Alfred Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 136.

³⁶ George B. Stauffer, "'This fantasia...never had its like': on the enigma and chronology of Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 903," in *Bach Studies*, ed. Don O. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 172.

thorough knowledge of the Bible, perhaps he was influenced by a specific passage in Nehemiah involving antiphonal music. The passage involves the Jewish remnant of Israel, having returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity. In the celebration of the repaired wall of Jerusalem, the antiphonal music of two choirs in call and response is documented. While Bach drew much inspiration from the Bible for the texts of his works, even his frequent use of antiphonal effects have historical precedence going back as far as the Old Testament.

More recent to Bach's time is the antiphonal compositional style made famous by the polychoral music of Giovanni Gabrieli (1555-1612). Gabrieli found great inspiration from his performance venue, the Basilica San Marco in Venice where there were several choir lofts. To utilize the acoustic space of the Basilica more fully, he composed music for different groups of musicians who were stationed in the separate lofts. The spatial separation naturally created an opposition between the groups of musicians, the interplay creating antiphony. Musicians as recent as Vaughn Williams were also inspired by the possibilities of antiphonal music, as shown in his work for multiple string ensembles, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. Perhaps the most lasting musical legacy of the physical structure of the Basilica is its important role in the genesis of the concerto genre, one based upon opposition of group and soloist.

In his book *The Classical Style*, Charles Rosen gives a valuable summary of the use of dynamics and rhythm in Baroque style, noting their similar treatment. That is, rhythmic motion in Baroque pieces is generally constant throughout most if not all of a work, but with the possibility of rhythm undergoing abrupt changes (as opposed to the more varied classical rhythmic style). In the same way, dynamics are held at a fairly

constant level, with contrast occurring without the gradual transition of a crescendo or diminuendo. Certainly crescendo and diminuendo were used for ornamental and expressive purposes in Baroque music (especially in vocal music), but as a general principal gradual change in dynamics was not part of the Baroque musical language.³⁷

Most Baroque pieces held a constant dynamic level, except when there was the use of a soloist with a larger group. According to Rosen, “‘terraced dynamics’ were not a necessity but a luxury in Baroque music.”³⁸ In support of this claim, he mentions that most harpsichords had only one manual, and stops were difficult enough to reach that quick succession of dynamics was nearly impossible.

Rosen makes the key distinction that the use of two manuals on the same keyboard instrument does not mean two dynamic levels, but rather two kinds of sonority. The use of opposing sonorities is more fundamental to the High Baroque style than dynamic contrast. The *Goldberg Variations* are an example of this idea, since the use of two keyboards clarifies the voice-leading in the variations with crossing voices. Rosen finds that 19th century “habits” of dynamic variety go against the often equally matched dynamic levels of Baroque music.³⁹

In order to transcribe the French Overture appropriately in terms of dynamics on the piano, it is useful to look at Bach’s dynamic instructions in other works. Unlike his son and other musicians throughout history, Bach did not organize his thoughts in the systematic fashion of a treatise. Bach may have been skeptical of attempting to capture music’s essence in a self-conscious, verbal discussion, but very likely he was simply too busy. All the surviving documents from Bach’s hand now numbers less than two hundred

³⁷ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style*, expanded ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 62.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

documents, including organ evaluations, letters of recommendation written as a civil servant, status reports, and petitions and formal complaints about musical situations.⁴⁰

While he was not disposed to write about music, he did leave clues to understanding his perspective. He wrote his intentions in scores, and as a teacher he also explained the rudiments of musical notation and realizations of ornaments in the *Clavier-Büchlein*, together with elementary rules of thoroughbass in Anna Magdalena Bach's *Clavierbüchlein*. The title pages and prefaces to the *Inventions*, *Sinfonias*, *Orgelbüchlein*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, *The Musical Offering*, and *The Art of Fugue* express the didactic function of these works. Therefore, even though Bach did not leave a treatise, his clear intentions found in his prefaces make Bach perhaps the most self-consciously pedagogical of the great composers.⁴¹

For his dynamic and tempo indications, Bach's terms encompass the Italian, French, Latin, and German languages. Bach used 17 different dynamic indications in his music, likely thinking of musical dynamics in terms of Walther's definitions from 1732. Walther's description of *forte* is defined as "strong, intense, but in a natural manner, without forcing the voice or instrument too much" and *piano* as "in effect, soft; one should adjust or reduce the strength of the voice or instrument so that it may have the effect of an echo." To the modern musician it comes as a surprise to learn that Walther defines the indication of "*pp*" as *più piano*, not *pianissimo*, and defines its use as "like a second echo, so that it sounds as if much farther away than piano."⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert L. Marshall, "Tempo and Dynamic Indications in the Bach Sources: a review of the Sources," in *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, tercentenary essays*, ed. Peter Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 259-60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 261-62.

Walther's definitions present a conception of dynamic effects as primarily an evocation of spatial, three-dimensional meaning for the listener. Dynamic contrast is used to evoke a sense of distance, of imaginative perspective. This is quite different from the expressive quality generally associated with the use of dynamics in the bulk of literature for the piano (although Debussy's *lointain* indication immediately comes to mind).

In Bach's use of dynamic indications, they do not rise above *forte* and are skewed to the soft end of the spectrum of sound. If Bach desired to augment volume, it was achieved most commonly by adding instruments or voices. Dynamic increase through the addition of voices was used in keyboard music as well, notably the B-Flat Minor Prelude from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (especially mm. 20-22).⁴³

For Bach, the orchestration of different voices had the largest role in creating more volume, not dynamic indications for the performer. While Bach marked ensemble compositions with dynamic indications, he left most solo works to the performer's discretion. In concerti, one of Bach's normal practices was to have the ensemble play *forte* during ritornellos, and *piano* during solo sections, as seen in the first movement of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. The opening ritornellos were not marked with a dynamic, and were assumed to be *forte* until the first *piano* indication. This implied *forte* at a piece's opening suggests that Bach regarded simple *forte* as the normal prevailing dynamic in a work when there is no indication to the contrary.⁴⁴

In concerto slow movements, Bach used *piano sempre* as the indication for the accompanying parts, as seen in the second movement of the Keyboard Concerto in D

⁴³ Ibid., 263.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 254-65.

Major, BWV 1054.⁴⁵ This is the same dynamic stratification found in the slow movement of the *Italian Concerto*. Here the harpsichordist's left hand is marked with a *piano* indication for the accompanying ostinato figure, and the aria for the right hand carries a *forte* indication, to be played on the other manual with the possibility of more projection.

The final chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion* is notable for its use of a *piano, pp*, *pianissimo* progression in several of the parts.⁴⁶ Marshall asserts that this is the first unambiguous indication of graduated dynamics, amounting essentially to a decrescendo. The same sequence appears in the viola part of the previously mentioned Keyboard Concerto in D Major.⁴⁷

Bach's D Minor Concerto after Vivaldi for organ, BWV 596, from 1713-1714 is the earliest instance of an indication for manual registration in his keyboard music. The chorale prelude "Liebster Jesu wir sind hier," BWV 634, also contains indication for use of the organ's opposing sonorities.⁴⁸ Another instance found in the *Clavierübung* collection for organ is the Prelude in E-Flat, BWV 552 (mm. 34-40). The organ had a primary position in his experience as an instrumental performer. Since Bach's sonic imagination was immersed in the capabilities of the instrument, the great variety of timbre possibilities on the organ certainly would have inspired his use of contrasting sonorities on other instruments. So while the two manuals of a harpsichord are more limited in their contrast, their use was a natural extension of Bach's musical vocabulary.

Bach's indications of *piano* and *forte* in a keyboard piece not specifically for organ shows that the music was intended to be played on a harpsichord with two

⁴⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁴⁶ Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Bach at the Keyboard*, 135.

⁴⁷ Marshall, "Tempo and Dynamic Indications in the Bach Sources: a review of the Sources," 263.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 267.

manuals, or keyboards. The difference of dynamic and color between two harpsichord manuals creates the typical Baroque terracing of dynamics, and provides an antiphonal contrast. As on the organ, a single keyboardist undertakes an effect usually realized by separate groups of musicians and contrasting instrumentation.

The fugato in the Overture movement of the *French Overture* displays Bach's assimilation of the homophonic Italian concerto style. The opposition of sounds between the keyboard manuals imitates the opposing forces of a large group and a soloist or smaller group. The dynamics take on what is largely a formal function as each section has a different "orchestration."

The opening of the fugato contains four disciplined fugal entries before using more sequential figuration. The first strong B Minor cadence brings the section to a close and is followed by a section marked *piano*, following a lighter, less strict style. After a cadence in D Major, the *forte* continues in B Minor, almost as if the *piano* section was a parenthetical formal insertion. The fugato continues with this discourse, each change of dynamic marking a section of the form. The most interesting move from *piano* to *forte* sections is one in which there are four staggered entrances of the countersubject, each delineated by a *forte* marking. This episode requires extra care when played on the harpsichord since the hands change manual one at a time, with little time to traverse the space.

One principal that the *French Overture* provides for other Bach dance suites is the dynamic indications given to paired dances. The first of the Gavottes and Bourrées are both marked *forte*, with the following second dances marked *piano*. These paired dances are much like the minuet and trio form later to become prevalent in the Classical style.

Here Bach seems to give clear indication of the lesser emphasis to be given the second, contrasting dances, similar to the smaller sound of a trio ensemble to the larger group in a minuet. While this approach does not demand to be followed in all similar situations in Bach's music, it is noteworthy to see how Bach exploited keyboard dynamics in the case of paired dances when his instrument had the capability.

The most striking uses of dynamic contrast in the suite are found in the Echo movement. This is a unique title in Bach's keyboard output, but another echo piece can be found in his cantata *Laßt uns sorgen, laßt uns wachen*, BWV 213. In the aria "Treues Echo dieser Orten," the Hercules character is echoed by a second vocal part in question and answer dialogue. The light orchestration also includes solo *Oboe d'amore* that echoes the vocal parts, as well as itself in the introduction. While there is a very different affect in this vocal work, it makes for a worthwhile comparison with the keyboard Echo.

In this rather homophonic movement of the *French Overture*, Bach's use of antiphonal effects reach their most virtuosic. As the title would suggest, the dynamic contrast occurs with *piano* echoes of the main body of material. These interjections occur rapidly and in fast succession, requiring accurate navigation between manuals, bringing to mind the similarly risky hand crossings of Scarlatti.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE *FRENCH OVERTURE* ON THE PIANO

Playing music on the piano that was originally written for a different instrument calls for the musician to be well informed in the transfer process. Having an understanding of the contrasting qualities of the two instruments is an excellent starting point towards this goal. While not apologizing for the resources of the piano, the pianist must also take care to understand the original instrument and era of style.

Since Bach wrote the *French Overture* for a two manual instrument, the keyboardist must have an awareness of how the music works in that instrumental idiom. It is essential for the pianist to try the work on a two manual harpsichord as well. Nothing can replace aurally experiencing the work on a harpsichord. In addition, the physical act of switching harpsichord manuals for dynamic contrast is very informative for one more accustomed to the single piano keyboard.

Contrapuntal music finds an ideal balance on the harpsichord. The sonic image of counterpoint on the harpsichord is invaluable to the pianist in handling the piano's thicker and longer lasting tone. While the harpsichordist seeks to create richness by holding notes longer with an over-legato technique, the pianist has very different necessities. Transparency of texture is certainly more challenging on the piano, and requires a light, more non-legato approach. The heavier nature of the piano is often compounded by the resonant acoustic of performance spaces, requiring even greater clarity.

Each early keyboard instrument is remarkably unique. From visual artwork on the instrument itself, to the variety of the instrument's sounds, there is great originality and personality in each harpsichord. While each of the more streamlined modern instruments widely used now certainly has a unique identity, this phenomenon is more pronounced in early instruments.

Through the keys, one can actually rest the finger on the strings of the harpsichord, giving an increased sense of connection to the instrument. The action of the modern piano has placed a complex mechanism between the player and the instrument that the keys activate. Playing the great romantic piano repertoire invites and often necessitates distance from the keys to realize powerful musical gestures successfully. On the other hand, to create the singing style of Baroque music, the modern pianist must develop a sense of connection to the key.

Dynamics

The *French Overture* is an excellent example of an idea that has grown into a rather clichéd term used by pianists for Baroque music: terraced dynamics. As already discussed, there is truth to the concept of terraced dynamics, but when it becomes a cliché, it is problematic. Pianists often overuse the idea of dynamic “echoes” in an attempt to render Baroque dynamics properly.

Charles Rosen states that the frequent repetitions in Scarlatti's keyboard music should have the effect of insistence, not of dynamic echo. The High Baroque style sought variety in ornamentation, not in creating dynamic contrast wherever possible.⁴⁹ Rosen is supported in his claim about Scarlatti's music since the bright, brilliant Italian

⁴⁹ Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 62-63.

harpsichords Scarlatti composed for had only one manual. While pianists should be trained to develop a wide dynamic palate, this variety can also be overused.

Student pianists are often concerned with making Baroque music “interesting” enough for the listener, and feel that there must be extreme dynamic variety for the music to captivate. Perhaps this stems from the core of piano music being in the Romantic piano tradition. The original context of the music can easily be neglected as a result of focus on specifically pianistic concerns. In the capturing of a suitable affect for a Baroque piece, attention to balance of counterpoint, articulation and touch should have equal importance.

In some ways the pianist needs a greater amount of imagination than the harpsichordist to realize the antiphonal effects in the *French Overture*. The harpsichord itself demands a spatial move to a different manual, and then the instrument naturally produces a contrasting sound. On the piano, the player must use his ear to create the appropriate dynamic contrast, and any physical shifts demanded by the harpsichord can only be imagined. Since the contrast between manuals of the harpsichord involves a change of tone color as well as volume, the piano’s *una corda* pedal can be very useful in achieving this effect.

It is telling that the *French Overture* is one of the few instances where Bach gave specific indications for the use of two manuals. In considering performance of Bach’s other keyboard works, certainly every change of manual on a harpsichord is not always indicated in the score. Therefore there is a great degree of freedom in the harpsichordist’s choices of registration, according to each unique instrument’s capabilities. For the pianist as well, there must be flexibility for imaginative use of dynamics in Bach. In the end,

echo effects can and should be employed when the appropriate juxtaposition of material occurs, but the effect should not be overused.

The piano's ability to imitate the voice with dynamic shaping of phrases is an essential facet of its identity as an instrument. These gradual dynamics must be used as well as the more specifically Baroque idea of terracing. It is the melodic, singing quality of Bach's music that must always be present when played on the piano.

Meter, Tempo and Rhythm

Rhythm is an essential ingredient in making Baroque dance music come alive in performance. There are many schools of thought concerning the correct rhythmic approach for Baroque music. Specialists in early music have different perspectives of musical time than pianists, perspectives that can open up new realms of performance possibilities.

Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne use the terms "beat," "pulse," and "tap" to discuss the use of different rhythmic levels in Bach's dance music. For instance, in a minuet, the dotted half note is the "beat," giving a sense of one beat per measure. The quarter note is the "pulse," and smaller divisions in eighth notes form the "tap" level. These definitions are valuable since observations about Baroque style can be made about each of these rhythmic levels.⁵⁰

For instance, the pulse is the lowest level that can be syncopated. The subdivisions of beats below (or more rapid than) the tap level are not rhythmically significant, but ornamental. As fast rhythmic values, the tap is the usual rhythmic level for the practice of *notes inégales* (rhythmically unequal pairs of notes) and it is also the

⁵⁰ Little, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 17.

shortest note value that can be articulated in a detailed manner (separating by slurs). This definition of rhythm and meter in Baroque music has parallels to dance and song. Just as harmonic changes in Baroque dance music occur on beat and pulse levels, but not on the tap level, so also in songs the text syllables are matched to the beat and pulse levels, and in dance the steps coincide with the rhythm of beat and pulse levels.⁵¹ Regardless of what terminology one uses for different rhythmic levels, the hierarchy of beat is essential for the performer in order to make artistic choices.

The idea of written out ornamentation is closely linked to an understanding of meter. Rhythm that moves faster than the tap level was essentially ornamental to the Baroque composer. Beat and pulse levels must be kept steady, but more rapid ornamental figuration invites freedom. While attention to rhythmic subdivision is important to every musician, each level of rhythm need not be played in a metronomic fashion.

This system of perceiving rhythmic strata serves to unify a pianist's understanding of the Baroque style in all genres. Tempo decisions for dance music are at once bound to the affect (or character) of the music, the metric structure, and which metric levels one wants to project as primary.⁵² Since Baroque dances are rarely encountered in the present time, it is important to realize the intentions of rhythm and tempo to capture the appropriate style.

The piano may have the possibility of sustaining slower tempos in Baroque music than the harpsichord, while at the same time, some fast tempi are not suitable for the piano's heavier touch. These are important considerations while taking into account tempo possibilities of the harpsichord and those likely for the era and genre of the piece.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Ibid., 19.

Excellent performances of Baroque dance music make each dance type recognizable by the highlighting its characteristic meter, tempo and rhythm. From the upbeat of the Gavotte to the Sarabande's poised second beat, there should be an aurally distinct sense of each dance type.

While metronome indications of tempo are not available for Baroque works, the process of choosing a suitable tempo may be more systematic than most pianists imagine. Robert L. Marshall has discussed what Bach's *tempo ordinario* may have been. Just as he summarizes Bach's default dynamic to be *forte* in the absence of other indications, he gives *allegro* as a possible *tempo ordinario* for his music.⁵³ He notes that the usual human stride and heartbeat lies somewhere between 60-80 beats per minute. Bach's usual tempo was said to be "very lively," so perhaps this would be near the 80 beats per minute mark. Rhythmic values used in a specific piece of Bach's music must be taken into account for decisions of tempo as well.⁵⁴

To extrapolate tempo estimates for other metric and rhythmic combinations, Marshall starts from the basis of the quarter note at 80 beats per minute. Eighth notes would then be at 160, and thus the dotted quarter note would be played roughly at 52. This estimation works well if the piece includes fast rhythmic values. In the case of slower rhythmic values, it would be likely to play the dotted quarter at 80, like the usual tempo for the regular quarter note, therefore a 3:2 ratio is a likely possibility.⁵⁵

This general approximation holds true for the *French Overture*. The slow and fast sections of the Overture movement provide an interesting question with their different

⁵³ Marshall, "Tempo and Dynamic Indications in the Bach Sources: a review of the Sources," 270.

⁵⁴ Robert L. Marshall, "Bach's *tempo ordinario*: A Plaine and Easie Introduction to the System," in *Critica Musica: Essays in Honor of Paul Brainard*, ed. John Knowles (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1996), 254-62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

meters. It is logical that there would be a common sense of time between the sections, even though at first hearing they may seem like not only different characters, but different tempos as well. However, the 3:2 ratio between the quarter note of the introduction, and the dotted quarter note of the fugal section works very well as a common sense of pulse. This common sense of time is very effective in unifying the movement from beginning to end.

The dotted rhythm in the opening of this Overture movement requires very different technique when played on the piano. Much more strength and calculation is required to make the short, quick notes speak clearly. Added to this musical challenge is the difficulty of making the rhythm sound natural and orchestral. It is true that as the piano has taken on an identity as a percussion instrument in recent times, it is not uncommon to hear pianists playing Baroque music too aggressively. Instead, the treatment of the driving rhythmic quality of Baroque music should always retain buoyancy.

Fuller acknowledges that music of the dotted style can seem aggressive and nonessential, sometimes cheap and mechanical and even gratuitous at times. But he goes on to note the increase of energy it creates, and the graceful quality it can lend the material. While musicians often try to soften the rhythm of the dotted style, Bach, Handel and Scarlatti went to the trouble of writing extra dots and flags.⁵⁶ Despite the challenges, the dotted gestures of the French Overture are an essential aspect of the piece's nobility and grandeur.

In his discussion of *notes inégales*, or unequal rhythm, the Baroque theorist M. de Saint-Lambert notes the importance of good taste: "The decision as to whether they

⁵⁶ Fuller, "The 'Dotted Style' in Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti," 117.

should be more or less unequal is a matter of taste. There are some pieces in which it is appropriate to make them very unequal and others in which they should be less so. *Taste is the Judge of this*, as it is of tempo.”⁵⁷ For the modern pianist, study and informed decisions are a large part of tastefully rendering Baroque music in all of its vitality.

Touch and Articulation

The use of rhythm and articulation grow from the performer’s concept of phrases.⁵⁸ Phrasing should be accompanied by a suitable fingering that highlights the given musical shape. Harpsichordists tend to set up and highlight strong arrival notes with articulated lifts before them. This is in contrast to the more constant legato of the pianist, often with legato phrasing to the emphasized notes. The piano requires more subtlety in successfully articulating strong beats without creating unwanted accents. While breaks in the sound are more noticeable on the piano and cannot be used in the same way, pianists should learn from the articulation necessary for the harpsichord. When piano performance of Baroque music becomes too Romantic sounding, often the culprit is not having enough detailed and subtle lifting of the hand.

Along with the phrase unit, general clarity of touch is another challenge to the pianist. Emulating the crisp attack of the harpsichord calls for the pianist to play very differently. Short articulation of each note in certain passages on the piano is necessary to create brilliance. Similarly, ornaments require more energy from the pianist to speak clearly.

⁵⁷ Mark Kroll, “French Masters,” in *Eighteenth-Century Keyboard Music*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 128.

⁵⁸ Little, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 20.

With so many different approaches to piano playing, it is easy to overlook the keyboard technique of the past. Forkel's observations of Bach's playing are striking and should be better known by the modern pianist. Forkel notes that Bach played with bent fingers that were always close to the keys, never falling to the key or thrown at the key. To gain appropriate shades of legato, and for brilliance in passages, he played by drawing back the fingertips to the palm. It was unique that Bach included use of the thumbs as well, developing finger equality not previously advanced.⁵⁹

C.P.E. Bach also mentions his father's use of the thumb:

Indeed, keyboard instruments were not tempered the same as nowadays, so one did not use all twenty-four keys as [we do] today, and therefore also one did not have the [same] variety of passages...My late father told me of having heard, in his youth, great men who did not use the thumb except when it was necessary for large stretches. Now as he lived at a time in which gradually a quite particular change in musical taste took place, he was obliged thereby to think out a much more complete use of the fingers, [and] especially to use the thumb – which among other good services is quite indispensable chiefly in the difficult keys – as Nature so to speak wishes to see it used. Thus was it raised at once from its former inactivity to the place of principle finger. Since this new fingering is so constituted that with it one can easily bring out every possible [thing] at the proper time, therefore I take it here as a basis.⁶⁰

While C.P.E. Bach's fingering system in his *Versuch* is not the same as his father's, Johann Sebastian's way of playing was taken as a starting point.

In studying different early fingering indications, one sees the connection between fingering and the desired articulation and grouping of notes. The transition from the old fingering style that made only infrequent use of thumbs, to Bach's addition of the thumb

⁵⁹ Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, 139-40.

⁶⁰ Mark Lindley, "Keyboard Technique and Articulation: Evidence for the Performance Practices of Bach, Handel and Scarlatti," in *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, tercentenary essays*, ed. Peter Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 232-33.

was a gradual one. However innovative, Bach's fingerings were far from our modern system of fingering.

Mark Lindley lists three misleading arguments that are often made by modern pianists: "Bach's technique was really the same as ours," "Early fingerings are merely primitive," and "The fingering doesn't matter." Just as the great 19th century pianists had a versatile mixture of technical devices, late Baroque keyboardists utilized a compound of old and new techniques. Studying their techniques displays their ideas of melodic articulation and motivic organization, the basis for their choice of fingering.⁶¹

Perhaps the most striking aspect of previous methods of fingering is the fact that they were far less systematic than modern pedagogical fingerings. Fingering decisions were made more on a case-by-case basis and were meant to fit subtly with the musical and technical peculiarities, as well as the performer's preferences in articulation and phrasing.⁶²

A Few Thoughts About Pedaling and Ornamentation

Several of the large chords in the opening of the French Overture are to be played broken, as they would be on the harpsichord. French harpsichord playing was very influenced by the idiomatic arpeggiations of the lute style (*style-luthée*) and the broken style, or *style-brisé*.⁶³ The rich texture of the Courante also invites the rolling of chords, whereas the very rhythmic character of the Echo would be diminished by the technique.

As previously mentioned, the *una corda* pedal can be used for contrast of timbre, when evoking the effects available to the harpsichord. The damper pedal can be helpful

⁶¹ Ibid., 207-8.

⁶² Ibid., 213.

⁶³ Kroll, "French Masters," 125.

in a dry acoustic, but can be harmful to articulation if overused. The pianist must cultivate a strong sense of finger-legato, with the pedal being employed only for the enhancement of sound. There need not be constant, seamlessly-smooth textures in Baroque music as in later piano repertoire.

It is not within the scope of this paper to give a full discussion of ornamentation. Many of Bach's works have his ornamentation included since he was wary of the over-ornamentation of performers in bad taste. One should study the many works of Bach that display appropriate ornamentation that he specifically wrote out. The pianist should not be afraid to practice experimenting with improvisation in Bach's works, while making an effort to never obscure or detract from Bach's foundational material.

CONCLUSION

Johann Sebastian Bach's keyboard repertoire is and should be at the heart of every pianist's musical study. Of course, performers from different backgrounds and perspectives argue about how to perform his music, and which instrument is proper. Some people settle the argument between early musicians and modern pianists by ignoring the discrepancies; however, this is a short-sighted approach. It is essential for modern pianists to take a step back from the piano in order to understand the unique qualities, capabilities, and limitations of earlier keyboard instruments. Experiencing Baroque literature on the harpsichord gives pianists the necessary context to help foster tasteful, convincing and informed approaches to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The *Overture after the French Manner* demonstrates Bach's understanding of French harpsichord style, and contains several dynamic indications that must be understood from the perspective of the harpsichord.

After the pianist becomes familiar with the composer's intended instrument, he should not limit himself to mere imitation of an older instrument, but confidently employ all of the piano's resources. The primary objective should be to make music, utilizing all of the vocal and orchestral possibilities of the piano, while having an awareness of the historical instrumental style. There is no right or wrong instrument for the great music of Bach; each keyboard instrument can contribute a unique perspective to performance. In the end, musicians can find Bach's music equally effective performed on harpsichord, or

heard in a Busoni piano transcription. Regardless of instrument, a tasteful performance will always display the expressive and contrapuntal genius of Bach's music, which cannot but leave a deep and lasting imprint on all who encounter it.

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Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.

Report this Document. Description: Bach and the French Overture. Copyright: © All Rights Reserved. (More on the lento marking later.) O'Donnell also uses associative information to estimate that Bach's overture first reprises and those of other German composers are slightly slower: J = MM 50-56. But there is still other evidence that supports at least the lower end of O'Donnell's estimates. This evidence comes from two early English mechanical organs. After its Overture in the French manner, Suite #1 offers a Courante, 2 Gavottes, the 2nd requiring strings played at the unison, as if to suggest, fanfare effect in the absence of trumpets. Next comes a Forlane, a dance originating from Friulia, which had been revived in France, the only example of its kind to appear in the 4 orchestral Suites. After this there are 2 Menuets, 2 Bourrées & 2 Passepieds, 3 dances that were equally French. I can't recall when I've enjoyed Bach's suites on period instruments more. Savall's readings are refreshingly normal in terms of tempos, phrasing, & articulation. This is not Bach played at warp speeds & with string-slapping bowing by La Maison des Fous. Luke Norell's thesis [Interpreting Bach's Overture After the French Manner on the Modern Piano](#), containing some useful information on Bach's French style (click here). (To be added to!) Whether you are a professional pianist, a piano student or play for your own pleasure your opinion and comments count. Let me thank you very much indeed in advance for your time and input! Take the survey.