

A Compositional Testing Ground: Arias in J. S. Bach's Weimar Church Cantatas*

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In 1708 the Hamburg librettist Barthold Feind (1678–1721) published a collection of poetry that included a lengthy essay entitled 'Gedancken von der Opera' (Thoughts on Opera). Feind's discussion of arias begins as follows: 'Die Arien sind fast in der Opera die Erklärung des Recitatifs ... und der Geist und die Seele des Schauspiels' (In opera, arias are virtually the declaration of the recitative ... and the spirit and soul of the drama).¹ Feind's description of operatic arias as 'der Geist und die Seele des Schauspiels' can easily be applied more generally to other vocal genres of the time. In this sense, one might consider the arias to be the 'Geist und Seele' of Bach's church cantatas, for instance. Arias not only magnify thoughts and feelings introduced in recitatives, but they are omnipresent in the cantatas – indeed, in virtually all of Bach's vocal music.

So far as we know, Johann Sebastian Bach began composing arias around the same time as Feind's essay appeared. The cantatas *Gott ist mein König* (BWV 71) and *Aus der Tiefen* (BWV 131), dating from his year as organist in Mühlhausen (1707–8), include a few vocal solos and duets. Likewise, several other works that apparently originated in that same year, or shortly thereafter, also contain arias or aria-like movements (BWV 4, 106, 150, 196, and possibly 143). These pieces are few in number and they present some formidable problems of chronology and authenticity. Quite apart from this, however, they also constitute a highly variegated repertoire. The contours of Bach's earliest aria style are therefore difficult to discern.²

Full references to standard Bach literature, and abbreviations used in *Understanding Bach*, 12 (2017) can be found at bachnetwork.co.uk/ub12/ub12-abbr.pdf.

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¹ Barthold Feind, *Deutsche Gedichte* (Stade: Hinrich Brummer, 1708; reprinted with introduction by W. Gordon Marigold (Berne: Peter Lang, 1989), 95.

² The literature on Bach's early vocal works is vast. A few of the key items include Alfred Dürr, *Studien über die frühen Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs*, rev. ed. (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1977); Miriam K. Whaples, 'Bach's Earliest Arias', *Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute*, 20/1 (1989), 31–54; Friedhelm Krummacher, 'Bachs frühe Kantaten im Kontext der Tradition', *Die Musikforschung*, 44 (1991), 9–32; Andreas Glöckner, 'Bachs frühe Kantaten und die Markus-Passion von Reinhard Keiser', in Karl Heller and Hans-Joachim Schulze (eds.), *Das Frühwerk Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Cologne: Studio, 1995), 257–64; Konrad Küster, "'Der Herr

About six years later, in March 1714, Bach's efforts in this realm received a major boost when he was promoted from organist to *Concertmeister* at the Weimar court. For the next thirty-three months, he composed a series of cantatas at the rate of about one per month. Since these works are dominated by arias, and this was the first extended period during which Bach composed them on a regular basis, the Weimar church cantatas comprise a kind of testing ground. In short, this was the time and place in which Bach cut his teeth as a composer of arias – even though he was by then around thirty years old and quite experienced in other areas of composition, especially organ music.

It is not possible to provide even a thumbnail sketch of all sixty-four Weimar arias in this brief article. My remarks will focus on the sixteen in regular da capo form, listed in Table 1. These movements are all in ternary form (ABA). The opening line or lines of the text are brought back at the end, and the music is identical to that of the beginning. In fact, the last segment is not written out, but simply indicated by the notation 'Da Capo' at the conclusion of the B section. The regular da capo form is, of course, the standard format for arias in the first half of the eighteenth century – not just for Bach's church cantatas, but across Europe

Table 1: Regular da capo arias in Bach's Weimar church cantatas

BWV	Title
182/5	Leget euch dem Heiland unter
12/4	Kreuz und Kronen sind verbunden
172/4	O Seelenparadies
21/5	Bäche von gesalzenen Zähren
21/10	Erfreue dich, Seele, erfreue dich, Herze
199/2	Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen
199/4	Tief gebückt und voller Reue
199/8	Wie freudig ist mein Herz
54/1	Widerstehe doch der Sünde
61/3	Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche
61/5	Öffne dich, mein ganzes Herze
63/3	Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget
163/1	Nur jedem das Seine!
132/1	Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn!
155/2	Du mußt glauben, du mußt hoffen
161/3	Mein Verlangen ist, den Heiland zu umfängen

denket an uns" BWV 196: Eine frühe Bach-Kantate und ihr Kontext', *Musik und Kirche*, 66 (1996), 84–96; Klaus Hofmann, 'Perfidia und Fanfare: Zur Echtheit der Bach-Kantate "Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele" BWV 143', in Barbara Mohn and Hans Ryschawy (eds.), *Cari amici: Festschrift 25 Jahre Carus-Verlag* (Stuttgart: Carus, 1997), 34–43; Christoph Wolff (ed.), *The World of the Bach Cantatas: Johann Sebastian Bach's Early Sacred Cantatas* (New York: Norton, 1997); Siegbert Rampe, "'Monatlich neue Stücke': Zu den musikalischen Voraussetzungen von Bachs Weimarer Konzertmeisteramt', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 88 (2002), 61–104; Markus Rathey, 'Zur Datierung einiger Vokalwerke Bachs in den Jahren 1707 und 1708', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 92 (2006), 65–92; Richard D. P. Jones, *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach*, Vol. 1: 1695–1717 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ernst Koch, "'Aus der Tieffen...": Zum Entstehungskontext der Kantate BWV 131 von Johann Sebastian Bach', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 95 (2009), 75–94; Jean-Claude Zehnder, *Die frühen Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs: Stil – Chronologie – Satztechnik* (Basle: Schwabe, 2009).

and in most vocal genres, including the ubiquitous opera. The fact that only a quarter of the arias in Bach's Weimar church cantatas follow this conventional pattern already provides a clue to his independent attitude towards this exceedingly common compositional task. Yet even among this more traditional group, Bach's solutions are anything but uniform.

I will concentrate here on just two specific aspects of the regular da capo arias in the Weimar church cantatas:

1. Structural ritornellos that are either shortened or omitted altogether (this will include brief consideration of the tonal structure of the opening ritornello);
2. Strategies for negotiating the seam between the end of the B section and the da capo.

Structural ritornellos that are shortened or omitted

All sixteen of the arias in Table 1 start with a ritornello, ranging in length from four to twenty-four bars. These are complex and engaging melodies in their own right, and whole dissertations have been written about them.³ For present purposes, though, let us consider just one simple question: What is the relationship between the ritornello at the beginning and the one at the end of the A section? In Weimar, it is nearly always the case that these two ritornellos are identical. Bach's usual practice is to restate the opening ritornello between the A and B sections. Since both ritornellos will normally be heard again in the da capo, this means that the instrumental passage at the beginning is performed a total of four times, at least. Moreover, these arias have the cyclical quality of ending the same way as they began.

Since the unvarying nature of the ritornello at these junctures is a standard feature of Bach's aria style, it is worth pointing out that this is not necessarily the case with other composers. In Handel's da capo arias, for instance, it sometimes happens that the second ritornello is identical to the first, or nearly so. But much more frequently the second ritornello is quite different from the first—usually shorter and often varied in other ways as well. In fact, it can be fairly said that Handel's approach is the opposite of Bach's—namely, to avoid exact repetition of ritornellos within a given movement.⁴

Bach's practice of reiterating the entire opening ritornello verbatim at the end of the A section means that it is noteworthy when something different is heard at

³ For example, Hio-Ihm Lee, *Die Form der Ritornelle bei Johann Sebastian Bach* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1993), and Riitta Rautio, 'Fortspinnungstypus Revisited. Schemata and Prototypical Features in J. S. Bach's Minor-Key Cantata Aria Introductions' (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2004). See also Erich Reimer, *Die Ritornell-Arien der Weimarer Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs 1714–1716* (Cologne: Dohr, 2007); Jean-Claude Zehnder, 'Ritornell – Ritornellform – Ritornellkonstruktion: Aphorismen zu einer adäquaten Beschreibung Bachscher Werke', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 98 (2012), 95–106; Siegbert Rampe, 'Grundsätzliches zur Ritornellform bei Johann Sebastian Bach', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 100 (2014), 61–71.

⁴ See Paul Brainard, 'Aria and Ritornello: New Aspects of the Comparison Handel/Bach', in Peter Williams (ed.), *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti: Tercentenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21–33, esp. 31.

this point. In the tenor aria ‘Nur jedem das Seine’, BWV 163/1, instead of the whole eight-bar ritornello, only the final cadential bar is quoted (see Fig. 1). As a result, there is little opportunity for the singer to catch his breath—a commonly cited reason for the division of arias into sections and subsections. For instance, Johann Mattheson remarked, just two years before Bach’s aria was composed, that ‘eine jede Aria zwey Haupt=Theile, und wenigstens eben so viele, wo nicht mehr Absätze hat, damit allda die Stimme ein wenig pausiren und Athem hohlen’⁵ (each aria has two main parts and at least as many subsections, if not more, so that the voice may take a little break and get his breath back).

bb. 1–8a	8b–22a	22b–23a (=7b–8a)	23b–30a	30b–31a (=7b–8a)	31b–37a	37b–38 (=7b–8a)	Da capo
Ritornello	A	Ritornello fragment	B1	Ritornello fragment	B2	Ritornello fragment	
	line 1		lines 2–5		line 6		
i	i	i	→v	v	→iv	iv	

Figure 1: Analytical diagram of ‘Nur jedem das Seine’, BWV 163/1

Bach’s decision to use only the last bar of the ritornello formed part of a larger compositional strategy in this aria. The same passage is subsequently used as the medial ritornello between the two subsections of B, and it is heard again as an epilogue to the B section as a whole, immediately before the da capo.

In three other Weimar da capo arias, the number of iterations of the opening ritornello is reduced by simply omitting one or more of them. The last movement of BWV 199, a cantata for soprano solo, is in most respects utterly conventional (see Fig. 2), except that the final cadence of the A section is not followed by a ritornello of any kind, whether full-length or shortened. Rather, it proceeds directly on to the B section. A primary reason for omitting the ritornello between A and B is that the A section is itself a thinly veiled re-composition of the ritornello. To hear the same melody three times in a row would probably have been too much of a good thing. But this procedure had a positive result as well. In the da capo, the fermata marking the end of the movement is placed over the last note of the A section. Instead of the usual concluding instrumental passage, then, the soprano sings along with the ensemble all the way to the end of the movement—which simultaneously marks the end of the cantata as a whole. To have the vocalist singing with the entire complement of instruments seems an especially felicitous way to conclude a solo cantata. That said, though, it is surprising that this does not occur more frequently. The only other solo cantata in which the vocalist sings until the end of the final movement is the much later *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen*, BWV 51 (1730).

⁵ Johann Mattheson, *Das Neu=Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1993), 179.

bb. 1-9	10-18	19-29	Da capo
Ritornello	A	B	
	lines 1-2	lines 3-5	
I	I	→ vi	

Figure 2: Analytical diagram of 'Wie freudig ist mein Herz', BWV 199/8

In the two other arias with missing ritornellos – the tenor aria from *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 61, and the duet for alto and tenor from *Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange*, BWV 155 – the omission occurs after the conclusion of the B section (see Figs. 3 and 4). Both pieces follow the usual pattern for da capo forms until the end of B. At this point, however, instead of the indication 'da capo', Bach wrote 'da capo dal segno'. Since the *segno* is placed at the beginning of the A section (bb. 17 and 5 respectively), the expected repetition of the opening ritornello does not occur.

bb. 1-17	17-35	35-51	51-7	57-63	63-75	Da capo dal segno (to b. 17)
Ritornello	A	Ritornello	B1	Ritornello (shortened)	B2	
	lines 1-2		lines 3-5		lines 3-5	
I	I	I	→ iii	iii	→ vi	

Figure 3: Analytical diagram of 'Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche', BWV 61/3

bb. 1-4	5-8	9	10-20	21-4	25-30	31-2	33-41a	41b	Da capo dal segno (to b. 5)
Ritornello	A1	Ritornello fragment	A2	Ritornello	B1	Ritornello fragment	B2	Ritornello fragment	
	lines 1-2		lines 1-2		lines 3-4		lines 5-6		
i	→ v	v	→ i	i	→ V/III	V/III	→ v	v	

Figure 4: Analytical diagram of 'Du mußt glauben, du mußt hoffen', BWV 155/2

It is not difficult to discern why Bach chose the *dal segno* form for 'Komm, Jesu, komm', BWV 61/3. Like BWV 199/8, discussed above, its A section is modelled quite closely on the opening ritornello. Since the entire sixteen-bar ritornello is played both before and after A, this means that essentially the same melody is heard three times in a row. To require that it be performed in the same way again after the B section – for a grand total of six iterations – would be to court boredom, if not disaster.

One might reasonably expect the *dal segno* variant of da capo form to become a standard feature of Bach's aria style in the future. As it turns out, however, BWV 61/3 and 155/2 constitute about a quarter of his extant *dal segno* arias. Six others, composed in the decade 1724-34, are scattered throughout several church

cantatas, the St. Matthew Passion, and a secular cantata (see Table 2).⁶ It is surprising that *dal segno* arias are not only so infrequent in Bach's oeuvre, but also that, for the most part, they involve the mere omission of the ritornello after the B section (or the substitution of a shorter instrumental passage). To invoke Handel again, *dal segno* arias are quite common in his vocal works, and they frequently involve not only reducing the length of the ritornello but also varying it in interesting ways. And what goes for Handel is true of many other composers as well. As James Webster has noted, the *dal segno* form was widely used throughout the eighteenth century.⁷ So Bach, it must be said, was the odd man out in this regard.

Table 2: *Dal segno* arias in Bach's vocal works

BWV	Title	Date
61/3	Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche	1714
155/2	Du mußt glauben, du mußt hoffen	1716
180/2	Ermuntre dich: dein Heiland klopft	1724
16/5	Geliebter Jesu, du allein	1726
244/65	Mache dich, mein Herze, rein	1727
51/1	Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen!	1730
51/3	Höchster, mache deine Güte	1730
215/5	Rase nur, verwegner Schwarm	1734

The exclusive use of tonally closed ritornellos in the Weimar arias

If one looks ahead to the large number of regular da capo arias composed in Cöthen (1717–23) and during Bach's first years in Leipzig (beginning in 1723), in most cases the ritornello after the A section matches the one at the beginning, as was the case in Weimar. But when the second ritornello is different from the first, the reason for this is frequently because the opening ritornello modulates and ends with a cadence in a key other than the tonic. If the initial ritornello is tonally open, it cannot be quoted verbatim at the conclusion of A. Since the second ritornello will subsequently serve as the last passage in the piece (at the end of the da capo), it has to be recomposed so that the movement will conclude in the tonic.

⁶ Some of these movements do not look like *dal segno* arias in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* – 'Mache dich, mein Herze, rein' from the St. Matthew Passion, for instance – owing to editorial decisions that suppress the original notation (with the *segno*) and write out the repeated music instead. Moreover, the *segno* is printed in the wrong place in BWV 180/2 (*Neue Bach-Ausgabe* I/25). In the autograph score, held by the Internationale Bachakademie in Stuttgart, Bach notates this aria until bar 81. The tenor line ends with the upbeat on g (text syllable 'Er'), then follows the *signum congruentiae*, which refers back to bar 13. I am grateful to Dr Peter Wollny (Bach-Archiv Leipzig) for this information, since this source is not readily accessible. The autograph scores of two additional movements – the alto/tenor duet 'Wir danken und preisen dein brünstiges Lieben', BWV 134/4 (1724), and the bass aria 'Ich will nun lassen', BWV 30/8 (1738) – also include *dal segno* indications. They were reworked, however, from BWV 134a/4 (1719) and 30a/7 (1737), both of which had been in regular da capo form.

⁷ James Webster, 'Aria as Drama', in Anthony R. DelDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 35.

The modulatory opening ritornello is a common option among the Leipzig arias – and not just those in regular da capo form, but among *all* the Leipzig arias. In this light, it is surprising that not a single one of the sixty-four Weimar arias begins in this way. Or, to put it the other way round, the opening ritornellos of all the Weimar arias are tonally closed, regardless of the movement's overall design. When I first noticed this, I wondered whether other composers came late to this technique as well. Again, Handel's practice is instructive. In works roughly contemporary with Bach's Weimar church cantatas – such as the *Brockes Passion*, HWV 48 (c.1715) or *Acis and Galatea*, HWV 49 (1718) – a few of the arias begin with ritornellos that modulate. More revealingly, however, they are also present in a couple of arias from Handel's very first opera, *Almira*, HWV 1, which was premiered in Hamburg in 1705, earlier than any of Bach's vocal music. It is customary to portray Bach as the innovator *par excellence* – and he clearly was in very many respects – but in the matter of harnessing the harmonic potential of the ritornello, he does appear to have been a johnny-come-lately.

Strategies for negotiating the seam between the end of B and the da capo

One of the defining features of arias in regular da capo form is that, immediately following the conclusion of the B section, all or most of the A section is repeated, along with its framing ritornellos. The seam where the end of B meets the da capo was frequently treated in a stereotypical manner. For instance, in Handel's opera *Rodelinda*, HWV 19 (1725), nearly all the arias are in da capo or *dal segno* forms – some two dozen movements – and the B sections of nearly all of them have what I call a 'hard' ending. This is produced by a cadence in the target key and a slowing or cessation of rhythmic activity, sometimes accompanied by the tempo indication *adagio* (see Example 1, the B section of Grimoaldo's second aria in Act I of *Rodelinda*).

The hard ending of B is ubiquitous in Handel's operas, and it is also standard for the da capo arias in works like the *Brockes Passion* and *Acis and Galatea*, mentioned above, as well as for those in Bach's Weimar cantatas from around the same time. It is important to have a vivid impression of this common and rather unexciting scheme, in order to appreciate the ways in which Bach and his contemporaries developed new approaches to this crucial structural moment. Sometimes there is just a quick turnaround, as in the tenor aria 'Mein Verlangen ist, den Heiland zu umfangen', BWV 161/3 (see Ex. 2). The cadence on the downbeat at the end of B (b. 109) is followed immediately by the opening ritornello. No material is added. Rather, the passage is fashioned so that it moves directly – and rather abruptly – from the dominant E minor on beat 1 back to the tonic A minor on beats 2 and 3.

Grimoaldo

Io d'A-strea do mo-to albran- do, io com- man- do, io so- no re, io com-

G.

man - - - - -

G.

do, io com- man- do, io so- no re.

Da capo

Example 1: Handel, 'Se per te giungo a godere' from *Rodelinda*, Act I, bb. 69b-81 (B section)

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Tenor

den - noch gleich den En - geln pran - gen.

Continuo

Da capo dal segno

Example 2: 'Mein Verlangen ist, den Heiland zu umfangen', BWV 161/3, bb. 106-10 (end of B section and beginning of da capo)

Of greater consequence are cases where continuity is maintained by adding material that binds the end of B to the beginning of the da capo. I call these 'soft' endings. For instance, in 'Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget', BWV 63/3, the cadence on the mediant C major at the end of the B section could easily have been treated

as a hard ending (see Ex. 3). But instead Bach added a bit of connective tissue in the continuo: a brief semiquaver passage (b. 42, beats 3–4), which also happens to be the head-motive of the ritornello. Similarly, in ‘Bäche von gesalznen Zähren’, BWV 21/5, the cadence on the dominant C major (b. 38, beat 1) is followed immediately by a brief passage that links up directly with the first bar of the opening ritornello (see Ex. 4). As a result, the caesura that one expects at this point is smoothed over.

Oboe

Soprano
e-wig nun ver-gnü-get, ver-gnü-get, ver-

Bass
gnü-get, ver-gnü-get, ver-gnü-

Violone, Organo

Ob.

S.
gnü-get.

B.
- get.

V., O.

Da Capo

Example 3: ‘Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget’, BWV 63/3, bb. 40–2, 1 (end of B section and beginning of da capo)

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Tenor

Continuo

Höch - sten al - lei - ne.

Da capo

Example 5: 'Nur jedem das Seine', BWV 163/1, bb. 37-8 (end of B section)

bb. 1-10	11-17a	17b-18a	18b-24a	24b-25a	25b-32a	32b-42a
Ritornello	A1	Ritornello fragment	A2	Ritornello fragment	A3	Ritornello
	lines 1-2		lines 1-2		lines 1-2	
I	I → V	V			→ I	I

42b-45a	45b-48a	48b-51a	51b-55	Da capo
B1	Ritornello fragment	B2	Ritornello fragment	
lines 3-5		lines 3-5		
→ V/vi	V7/iii → vi	→ V/iii	V7/vi → III (Picardy third)	

Figure 5: Analytical diagram of 'Widerstehe doch der Sünde', BWV 54/1

is that the instrumental ensemble plays alone on both sides of the seam: at the end of B and at the beginning of the da capo.

The most prominent example of this technique is in the alto aria 'Widerstehe doch der Sünde', BWV 54/1. The beginning of this piece has captured the attention of many commentators on account of its 'sequence of dissonant chords', illustrating resistance to sin.⁸ The structure of its B section is of even greater interest, however. As can be seen in Figure 5, lines 3 to 5 are set in two brief vocal paragraphs (B1 and B2). Both times, the expected cadence is temporarily

⁸ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 133.

subverted and resolved only in the course of the instrumental passage that follows. These interrupted or deceptive cadences—as well as the Picardy third at the end of B (another unexpected move)—were devised as a rather literalistic depiction of devilish deception, prompted by the text's warning, 'Laß dich nicht den Satan blenden' (Do not let Satan delude you). The result of this procedure is that the B section ends with an instrumental epilogue similar to the one in BWV 163/1, but longer and more impactful.

Summary

The findings of this brief analytical inquiry may be summarised as follows:

1. When Bach first began composing arias on a regular basis, the opening ritornello was always tonally closed, and wholesale repetition of the opening ritornello was to be expected;
2. Unlike other composers, Bach only rarely used the *segno* to reduce the length of the da capo;
3. Bach did, however, develop alternative ways of proceeding from the end of the B section to the da capo, which either created continuity and smoothed over the seam, or added an instrumental epilogue.

There are many other phenomena that deserve similar scrutiny—for instance, arias in which one or more lines from the A section are interpolated into the B section as well; movements in which all or part of B is in a different tempo from A; and pieces containing a sudden harmonic shift near the end of the B section. But these and other matters must be reserved for another occasion.