

In memory of a great Bach scholar, Georg von Dadelsen

'His superior ideas are the consequences of those inferior ones': Influence and Independence in Bach's Early Creative Development

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This paper is a by-product of my recent book,¹ in which I try to use in-depth musical analysis to shed light on the development of Bach's compositional style and technique. The quotation in the title about inferior and superior ideas is drawn from a sketch of Bach dating from 1741 by one Theodor Leberecht Pitschel, a graduate of the University of Leipzig. The full passage reads:

The famous man who has the greatest praise in our town in music, and the greatest admiration of connoisseurs, does not get into condition . . . to delight others with the mingling of his tones until he has played something from the printed or written page, and has [thus] set his powers of imagination in motion. . . [He] usually has to play something from the page which is inferior to his own ideas. And yet his superior ideas are the consequences of those inferior ones.²

This quotation is, of course, concerned with improvisation rather than composition, and it dates from Bach's later Leipzig years. Yet we possess abundant evidence that the music of other composers acted as a spur to Bach in composition as well as in improvisation; and such evidence can be found throughout his entire creative career. Here I want to focus on the early period, up to 1708, and on the Weimar period, from 1708 to 1717.

Now we all know that one of the hallmarks of juvenilia is a young composer's dependence on external models. He or she tends to rely heavily on the works of predecessors and contemporaries in the process of forging his or her own compositional style and technique. However, once that mature style has been formed, development thereafter tends to be more self-referential and correspondingly less dependent on outside influence. Or so we might imagine, but does our picture of a typical composer's creative development correspond

¹ Richard D. P. Jones, *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach*, Vol. I: 1695–1717 (Oxford, 2007).

² *Bach Dokumente* II, no. 499; *New Bach Reader*, no. 336.

with the reality in Bach's case? In order to try and answer this question, I want to approach Bach's early and Weimar periods with two further questions in mind. First, is the music of Bach's early years – that is, before the move to Weimar in 1708 – largely derivative, or do we find unmistakable evidence of real originality even at this early period? Secondly, after Bach's arrival at full maturity as a composer – that is, in Weimar by about 1710 or 1712 – to what extent do the ideas of other composers continue to play a crucial role in his creative work? I shall approach these questions with reference to representative works from each of the two periods: for the pre-Weimar period, the early toccatas in D major and in the minor keys of D, E and G, BWV 912-15;³ and for the Weimar period, the *Pièce d'orgue*, otherwise known as the Fantasia in G, BWV 572.

Let us first look at some of the manifestly derivative elements of the early toccatas. These works clearly owe much to the North German prelude and toccata of Buxtehude, Reincken and others, whose character is in turn determined to a large extent by the rhapsodic freedoms of the so-called *stylus phantasticus* – a style that derives its rhetoric from the spontaneous gestures of improvisation, whether real or contrived.⁴ Pseudo-improvisatory preludes and interludes of this kind give way to fugal sections or movements that may be viewed as a form of consolidation in theme and texture, such as might well be achieved during the course of an actual improvisation. In the case of the D minor Toccata (and later on in the Toccata in F sharp minor too), Bach based an Adagio interlude exclusively on a fixed chord progression, which forms the subject of meditative sequences throughout the entire movement. Reincken had employed the same technique in the equivalent movement of his Toccata in G, and parallels may also be found in works by Werckmeister, Böhm, Kuhnau and Zachow.⁵ The finale of Bach's E minor Toccata belongs to the *Spielfuge* type, which lays special emphasis on manual dexterity, typically demonstrating it by means of continuous running semiquavers.⁶ Bach's ample fugue subject

³ The Toccatas in D major and D minor both probably originated before 1707. In the case of the D major, this dating is established by its entry in the Möller Manuscript (SBB, Mus. ms. 40644) in the hand of Bach's elder brother, Johann Christoph of Ohrdruf. The D minor Toccata may be older still: in the earliest source (P 281, perhaps in the hand of one of Bach's Weimar pupils) it is entitled 'Toccata prima', and this is already a revised version; the early version, BWV 913a (preserved only in a posthumous edition), like the E major Capriccio, was written 'In honorem delectissimi fratris [Johann] Christ[oph] B[ach] Ohrdruffiensis'. The oldest sources of the E minor and G minor Toccatas date from Bach's Leipzig period (after 1723), but the internal stylistic evidence is strong for dating them not long after the D major and D minor works. For full details of the sources, see Peter Wollny, *Krit. Bericht, NBA V/9.1* (Kassel & Leipzig, 1999).

⁴ For a useful discussion of the *stylus phantasticus*, revealing how it was understood by contemporary theorists, see Kerala J. Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck* (New York & London, 1987), pp. 248–53.

⁵ See Willi Apel, *Geschichte der Orgel- und Klaviermusik bis 1700* (Kassel, 1967); trans. & rev. by H. Tischler as *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1972), p. 627.

⁶ The term *Spielfuge* was employed by Stefan Kunze, 'Gattungen der Fuge in Bachs

comprises stair-like, broken-chordal and pseudo-*bariolage* figures, all of which may be found in *Spielfuge* subjects from the manual toccatas of Reincken, Heidorn and Buxtehude. Some specific thematic links with Reincken's *Hortus musicus* of 1687, from which Bach later made selected keyboard arrangements, have been pointed out in the D major Toccata by Pieter Dirksen⁷ and in the finale of the G minor Toccata by Peter Wollny.⁸

Bach's overall structure in all these early toccatas may be construed as a four-movement scheme – introduction, Allegro, Adagio, Allegro (with the fast movements normally fugal) – which has affinities not only with the typical five-fold sequence of the North German prelude (prelude, fugue, interlude, fugue, postlude), but also with the classic four-movement design of the Corellian trio sonata (slow movement, fugue, slow movement, finale – which is often freely fugal). In the loosely fugal second movement of Bach's D minor Toccata, the initial counterpoint of a terse subject with a suspension figure recalls a standard opening in Corelli's fugal movements. The extension thereafter of both subject and countersubject to form prolonged sequences built on suspension chains is thoroughly Corellian. The combined subjects of the equivalent movement of the E minor Toccata consist at root of no more than a decorated pair of suspensions with an exchange of parts midway. Such thematic combinations are to be found not only in Corelli but in much seventeenth-century Italian instrumental music, notably in the piece on which Bach's Legrenzi Fugue (BWV 574b) was based, to judge by the consequent phrase of the initial thematic combination. Returning to Corelli, he, perhaps partly via Georg Böhm, also seems to have been the ultimate source of a form of pattern play that we encounter frequently in Bach's early music.⁹ In the fugal finale of the D major Toccata, for example, the brief subject and its regular counterpoint are repeated over and over again on different scale degrees, immediately juxtaposed so as to cause abrupt changes of key, building up an exhilarating *perpetuum mobile*.

Keyboard pseudo-recitative, such as that which directly precedes and follows the F sharp minor fugato in the Toccata in D, is a phenomenon that Bach would have encountered close at hand in Kuhnau, as well as in the North German school. Similarly, the Allegros of the early toccatas take their cue not just from the North German tradition but from Kuhnau's keyboard sonatas, in addition to

Wohltemperiertem Klavier', in M. Geck (ed.), *Bach-Interpretationen* (Göttingen, 1969), pp. 74–93 (esp. 90–1), and has since been taken up by (among others) George Stauffer, 'Fugue Types in Bach's Free Organ Works', in G. Stauffer & E. May (eds.), *J. S. Bach as Organist* (London, 1986), pp. 133–56 (esp. 134–8).

⁷ See P. Dirksen, 'Zur Frage des Autors der A-dur-Toccata BWV Anh. 178', *BJ* (1998), 121–35.

⁸ See P. Wollny, 'Traditionen des phantastischen Stils in J. S. Bachs Toccaten BWV 910–916', in W. Sandberger (ed.), *Bach, Lübeck und die norddeutsche Musiktradition* [conference report, Lübeck, 2000] (Kassel, 2002), pp. 245–55 (esp. 252–4).

⁹ Jean-Claude Zehnder, 'Georg Böhm und J. S. Bach: zur Chronologie der Bachschen Stilentwicklung', *BJ* (1988), 73–110 (see pp. 90–1), assumes that Bach's use of this technique is indebted to Böhm. He does note, however, that its origins are probably Italian, and that many comparable passages may be found in Corelli's Opp. 3 & 4 (e.g. Op. 3 No. 4, finale, bb. 13ff.).

various Italian sources. In some respects Kuhnau seems to have a baleful influence on the young Bach. The themes of the Allegro second movement of the D major Toccata, for example, fall into regular single-bar phrases, giving rise to a squareness and monotony of phrase structure that strongly recalls Kuhnau. In the D minor Toccata, Bach's attempt to build two Allegros (that is, the second and fourth movements) out of a single brief theme creates an obsessively monothematic impression that again brings to mind certain movements from Kuhnau's keyboard sonatas. There is also a positive side to his influence, however. In terms of their admirable overall structure, the Allegro second movements of the D major and G minor Toccatas turn out to be successors to early sonata movements of Bach's (BWV 963 no. 1 and 967), which in turn appear to be partly modelled on certain movements from the sonatas of Kuhnau's *Frische Clavier Früchte*. All of these pieces exhibit a mode of structuring that apparently has close links with the early concerto.¹⁰ In the Allegro from the D major Toccata, the entry of the genial subject in a quasi-fugal alternation between tonic and dominant – itself a recurring feature of Torelli's concerto movements – prompts the idea of its statement in different keys in quick succession (bb. 15-17: b – A – G). This idea is then taken up at the start of each new paragraph (bb. 24, 39 and 53), the last key in each case becoming the new temporary tonic. The subject thus functions very much like the motto theme – an antecedent of the ritornello – in Torelli's *Concerti musicali*, Op. 6, of 1698, or in the concertos from Albinoni's *Sinfonie e concerti a 5*, Op. 2, of 1700.¹¹ As in so many cases, it seems clear that Bach was not content merely with the German intermediary Kuhnau but went to the original Italian sources themselves.

In contrast, we occasionally notice in Bach's early toccatas elements of the contemporary French style. The Adagio passage in the introduction to the G minor Toccata, for example, must be one of the earliest of many examples in Bach in which the French style is evident not only in the employment of a specific dance rhythm – here that of the sarabande – but also in the profuse ornamentation of the texture, whether written out in full or in the form of ornament signs.¹² Another form of French textural adornment is not uncommon in early Bach, namely the *style luthé* (nowadays often known as *style brisé*), a lute-style keyboard texture of frequent occurrence in Böhm, J. C. F. Fischer and other 'Frenchified' German composers. The young Bach employed this texture in his toccatas, particularly in the slow third movement of the D major and E minor Toccatas. In the latter case, a chord elaborated in *style luthé* recurs nine times on different degrees of the scale as a clear point of reference amid the impromptu-style musings that surround it.

¹⁰ Concerning the presence of formal and stylistic elements derived from the early concerto in Kuhnau's sonatas, see Jochen Arbogast, *Stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Klavierwerk des Thomaskantors Johann Kuhnau* (Regensburg, 1983), esp. pp. 150–69.

¹¹ See Michael Talbot, 'The Concerto Allegro in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Music & Letters*, 52 (1971), 8–18 & 159–72, and the same author's *Tomaso Albinoni: The Venetian Composer and his World* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 101ff.

¹² Although it is uncertain how far the scribe J. G. Preller (P 1082) was reproducing the ornamentation of the autograph MS; see Wollny, *Krit. Bericht*, NBA V/9.1, p. 103.

Despite the obvious input within the early toccatas from many diverse composers, styles and genres, it seems to me that Bach's independence as a creative artist was already unmistakably asserting itself. He shows an early fascination with the further and more exotic reaches of the tonal system, which he must have explored in the course of improvisation at the keyboard – this would, at any rate, square with Forkel's assertion (presumably derived from the Bach sons) that in his improvised fantasies 'all the twenty-four keys were in his power: he did with them what he pleased'.¹³ Even in his early works he shows a predilection for protracted excursions into distant tonal regions and back. The Adagio third movement of the D minor Toccata, for example, which we have already noted as based throughout on an elaborated chord progression, owes its charm not just to the inherent beauty of the theme and its meditative reiteration, but to the ever-shifting tonal perspective afforded by far-reaching modulation. The movement modulates via the circle of 5ths from the temporary tonic G minor to E flat minor, and then in palindromic fashion back via the same sequence of keys in reverse. In the later stages of the fugal fantasia that forms the finale of the D major Toccata – whose combined subjects we have already noted as constantly repeated on different scale-degrees, immediately juxtaposed so as to cause abrupt changes of key – Bach finally reaches the key of G sharp minor, which stands at the furthest possible remove from the tonic, before reversing the tonal direction in the mainly episodic passage that follows.

The pseudo-improvisatory style that Bach employs in the preludes and interludes of the early toccatas is no pale imitation of Buxtehude or Reincken, still less of Frescobaldi or Froberger. It belongs very much to his own day. For counterpoint could be written in an old style, but not music that is meant to sound 'off the cuff' – no one would dream of improvising in an outdated style. Thus the keyboard pseudo-recitatives that surround the F sharp minor fugato in the Toccata in D, whatever their input from Kuhnau and the North Germans, are highly personal and belong among the youthful Bach's most extravagant and romantic utterances. He later subjected them to detailed revision; and the later version sounds, if anything, more spontaneous than the earlier, which draws attention to the curious paradox inherent in the 'fantastic style' to which Bach was heir in such music: that considerable art has to be employed to create the *impression* of spontaneity.¹⁴

At the opposite extreme, there is already clear evidence in the structure of these early compositions of a powerful intellect at work behind the notes. In the introductory movements of the toccatas, for example, we detect a greater underlying element of control on the part of the composer than is usual in the North German style.¹⁵ Characteristically, the fugal movements in the toccatas are often longer, stricter and more formal than their equivalents in the North German preludia and toccatas. Not all of them would have met with the

¹³ *NBR*, p. 436.

¹⁴ Mattheson asserted that the toccata is 'intended to make the *impression* of being played impromptu' (my italics).

¹⁵ As pointed out by Friedhelm Krummacher, 'Bach und die norddeutsche Orgeltoccata: Fragen und Überlegungen', *BJ* (1985), 119–34 (esp. 124–5).

approval of the Hamburg theorist Johann Mattheson, who, writing of the *stylus phantasticus* to which the toccata properly belongs, complained that 'those composers who work out formal fugues in their fantasias or toccatas do not maintain the integrity of this style, for nothing is so very contrary to it as order and constraint'.¹⁶ The larger fugues, for example, such as the finales of the E minor and G minor Toccatas, often have the character of big set pieces. And in the F sharp minor Fugue from the Toccata in D, a double subject is joined by a further regular countersubject in triple counterpoint; and similar contrapuntal rigour is reflected in the density of the first two episodes, in which a chromatic descent is combined with complementary figures derived from the two main subjects. Bach would surely have been castigated by Mattheson for the inclusion of this fugue, had the Hamburg theorist focused his critical attention upon the work. It seems likely, however, that Bach had a particular end in view: since the fugue emerges from instrumental recitative, and dissolves back into the same at the end, he might well have conceived the movement as the most extreme imaginable juxtaposition of strict and free styles of composition.

If we place the toccatas within the context of Bach's early creative work, they can be viewed as presumably somewhat later, more independent products of several converging lines of development: the Kuhnau keyboard sonata, which he had explored in his early sonatas and capriccios; and the North German-style prelude, which is reflected in his early Preludes and Fugues in A minor and E major (BWV 551 and 566). To these genres we must add the Corellian trio sonata, the early concerto of Torelli and Albinoni, and some elements of late seventeenth-century French style. Bach's own personal synthesis within the early toccatas of diverse genres and national styles in itself undoubtedly represents a major original achievement.

Let us now turn to the later Weimar period, about 1713–17, by which time Bach has reached full maturity as a composer and we hear his own individual voice consistently in vocal and instrumental music alike. Do we find that the balance between influence and independence has changed decisively in favour of the latter? Or do the ideas of other composers continue to play a crucial role in his creative work? I want to try and answer these questions with reference to a major, representative work of the period, the *Pièce d'orgue*, BWV 572, a type of fantasia and hence a close relative of the toccata.

The French title and tempo marks of this piece – 'très vivement', 'gravement' and 'lentement' – suggest a possible link with French organ music, and a likely model for the principal, central section has been identified: the *Grand plein jeu continu* that opens Jacques Boyvin's *Premier Livre d'Orgue* of 1689, a collection that was copied out in full by Bach's pupil Johann Caspar Vogler around 1710–15.¹⁷ The affinity between the two pieces can hardly be overlooked: they have in common their alla breve metre, white notation, sustained five-part texture, and rich harmony-counterpoint, with much recourse to 7th and 9th chords and to contrary motion.

¹⁶ See Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739); facsimile edn, ed. M. Reimann (Kassel & Basel, 1954), p. 88; Eng. trans. by E. C. Harriss (Ann Arbor, 1981), p. 217.

The principal subject of the central *alla breve* section is the hexachord – the slow scale ascent in whole notes from G to e in the bass at the outset of the movement – and hence, quite apart from its French connection, the piece belongs to the great tradition of hexachord fantasias from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to which, among others, Byrd, Bull, Sweelinck and Froberger contributed.¹⁷

In addition to these associations, it has been conjectured¹⁸ that the *Pièce d'orgue* might represent Bach's response to the musico-theoretical dispute between Johann Mattheson and Johann Heinrich Buttstedt that took place in the second decade of the eighteenth century. In Mattheson's first book, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* of 1713, he roundly dismissed the old system of solmization based on modes and hexachords in favour of the modern system of tonality, with its twenty-four major and minor keys. Buttstedt's reply took the form of a treatise, entitled *Ut, mi, sol, re, fa, la: tota musica et harmonia aeterna*, published in 1715, in which he subscribes to the opposing, conservative viewpoint, advocating the continued validity of the old system. Bach's *Pièce d'orgue*, according to this hypothesis, was designed to support Mattheson's progressive position, being a satirical composition in which the rules of the old system, applied in conjunction with the means of the new, lead *ad absurdum*.

Regardless of this possible association, the piece must be viewed within the context of Bach's own creative development over the previous ten years or so, roughly 1705–15. With its tripartite fantasia structure – introduction, *alla breve*, conclusion – it is closely related to the Fantasia in A minor, BWV 922, and to the Prelude in D, BWV 532 no. 1, to which a fugue was only later appended. All three pieces present similar solutions to the problem of uniting free and structured modes of writing without recourse to fugue. Of the three, the *Pièce d'orgue* is much the most mature and the only one that is likely to have originated in the mid-to-late Weimar years.¹⁹ In accordance with Bach's mature Weimar style, the texture is consistently motivic throughout. In view of his known preoccupation with the Italian concerto, it is hardly surprising that clear links can be established with the concertante style that he was developing at that time in keyboard and vocal-and-instrumental music alike. The introductory *passaggio*, for example, is smoother and more violinistic and Italianate than Bach's 'organistic' *passaggi* of old,²⁰ and might derive from the *perfidia* of

¹⁷ See George Stauffer, 'Boyvin, Grigny, d'Anglebert, and Bach's Assimilation of French Classical Organ Music', *Early Music*, 21 (1993), 83–96 (the Boyvin piece is quoted in full on p. 87). The MS copy (Berlin, Mus. ms. 2329) was first linked to Bach by Victoria Horn, 'French Influence in Bach's Organ Works', in *J. S. Bach as Organist*, pp. 256–73 (esp. 259–60).

¹⁸ By Siegbert Rampe, 'Bachs *Pièce d'Orgue* G-dur BWV 572: Gedanken zu ihrer Konzeption', in M. Geck (ed.), *Bachs Musik für Tasteninstrumente* [conference report, Dortmund, 2002] (Dortmund, 2003), pp. 333–69 (see pp. 357–63).

¹⁹ J. G. Walther's copy in P 801 dates from before 1717; see Kirsten Beißwenger, 'Zur Chronologie der Notenhandschriften Johann Gottfried Walthers', in *Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut, Göttingen* (eds.), *Acht kleine Präludien und Studien über Bach: Festschrift für Georg von Dadelsen* (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 11–39.

²⁰ J-C Zehnder, 'Zu Bachs Stilentwicklung in der Mühlhäuser und Weimarer Zeit', in K.

Torelli's concertos – solo or duo passage-work notable for its persistent repetition, varied or unvaried, of one or two basic motives. The central *alla breve* formally resembles a succession of ritornello-like periods²¹ – a species of concerto form that Bach seems to have developed ultimately from the early concertists Torelli and Albinoni. It is organised according to a very clear period structure, articulated by aurally significant cadences, in which each period opens with a varied thematic return and then continues with a new or varied *Fortspinnung*, or sequential 'spinning-out', modulating to and cadencing in a new key, which then begins the next period. By the later Weimar years, Bach was already in full command of the then modern tonal system, as he was about to demonstrate in spectacular fashion in *The Well-tempered Clavier*. Hence the fully comprehensive range of modulation in the *alla breve* of the *Pièce d'orgue*, encompassing the keys on every degree of the hexachord – that is, all the keys directly related to the tonic G major. Hence, too, the advance dissonance treatment in the suspensions of the *alla breve* and the figuration of the cadenza-like conclusion, based on the *arpège figuré*, or broken chord with dissonant passing notes. With its chromatic bass descent through an octave and its alternation of 7th and 6-4-2 chords, this conclusion recalls the similarly chromatic cadenzas of the G minor Prelude, BWV 535 no. 1, and of the D minor Fugue, BWV 948. All three passages show the Bach of the mature Weimar years intent on exploring the outermost reaches of the tonal system.

Whether or not Bach had the Mattheson-Buttstedt dispute in mind, then, it does seem likely that in this remarkable composition he was attempting his own personal reconciliation between old and new, between received elements on the one hand and bold innovations on the other. How does this compare with our findings in relation to the early toccatas? What difference does Bach's attainment of full creative maturity in the interim make to the balance between influence and independence? Well, I think it makes a good deal less difference than we might have expected. In the early toccatas and in the *Pièce d'orgue* alike, Bach's powerful musical personality is brought to bear upon a range of diverse stylistic and technical elements, some highly individual, others clearly derived from the procedures of his predecessors and contemporaries. These diverse elements are fused by the alchemy of genius to create an entity that possesses true originality. The essential difference is that, by the time he composed the *Pièce d'orgue*, Bach was no longer operating with the early style that served for the toccatas, with its pattern-based writing and strong leanings towards the North German *stylus phantasticus*, but had already developed that mature style, compounded of operatic, concertante, motivic and contrapuntal elements, that would in essence serve him for the rest of his life.

Heller & H.-J. Schulze (eds.), *Das Frühwerk J. S. Bachs* [conference report, Rostock, 1990] (Cologne, 1995), pp. 311–38 (see p. 318), notes the retreat of the North-German style in favour of Italianate writing in Bach's organ and harpsichord works of c. 1709–11 onwards.

²¹ As does, e.g., the Prelude in G, BWV 541 no. 1; see Werner Breig's description of this piece in his 'Bachs freie Orgelmusik unter dem Einfluß der italienischen Konzertform', in R. Szeskus (ed.), *J. S. Bachs Traditionsraum*, Bach-Studien 9 (Leipzig, 1986), pp. 29–43 (see p. 36).