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# GRIEPENKERL ON J.S. BACH'S KEYBOARD TECHNIQUE A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Quentin Faulkner

Although he was not a professional musician, the German scholar and teacher Friedrich Konrad Griepenkerl (1782–1849) studied music theory, organ and piano with Johann N. Forkel, J.S. Bach's first biographer. Throughout his life Griepenkerl actively promoted the performance and study of Bach's keyboard works, and in 1844 he began to issue the first critically corrected complete edition of Bach's organ works, which organists know today as the Peters edition. In the preface to Vol. I of this edition (p. II), Griepenkerl briefly discussed Bach's manner of keyboard performance, and in this regard referred to three sources, each one more detailed than the preceding:

1. C.P.E. Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen* (1753), Part I, p. 104.
2. J.N. Forkel's *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (1802), pp. 11–14.
3. Griepenkerl's own account, found in his edition of Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* (1819).

Griepenkerl, then, considered his own account to be the most complete and accurate description of J.S. Bach's keyboard technique. He suggested that, although his remarks refer to performance on the pianoforte, the touch he described is far more advantageous for performance on the organ.

In the January 1983 issue of the Netherlands organ periodical *Het Orgel*, Dutch organist and musicologist Ewald Kooiman published an article on J.S. Bach's keyboard technique.<sup>1</sup> In this article he in-

cluded the text of Griepenkerl's extensive and long-unnoticed account. The Music Division of the U.S. Library of Congress possesses a copy of Griepenkerl's edition of the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*.<sup>2</sup> This copy provides the following text, to which I have added an English translation and a number of comments to put the essay and the information it gives into proper perspective. In the preface to Vol. I of the Peters edition, Griepenkerl referred to his remarks as a *Vorrede* (Foreword), but the Library of Congress copy includes them as a postscript to the music. From its title one would expect to read an explanation of how to perform the work properly, but in fact the bulk of the text is taken up with remarks about Bach's keyboard technique.

## SOME REMARKS CONCERNING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE CHROMATIC FANTASY

The Bach School demands cleanness, ease and freedom in performance in even its most difficult works, to a degree that can be attained only by means of its own peculiar method of touch. This touch Forkel has so accurately and clearly described, in his little volume *Über J.S. Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, that several intelligent men who were seriously concerned about the matter and have not allowed themselves to be misled by narrow prejudice have managed to master it perfectly without any example or oral instruction. That which is essential with respect to this is as follows:

The mechanism of the hand is based upon its ability to grasp. In grasping, all of the fingers bend themselves together with the thumb

# CHROMATISCHE FANTASIE

für das Pianoforte

VON

## JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH.

*Neue Ausgabe mit einer Bezeichnung ihres wahren Vortrags, wie derselbe von J.S. BACH auf W. FRIEDEMANN BACH, von diesem auf FORKEL und von FORKEL auf seine Schüler*

gekommen

LEIPZIG, IM BUREAU DE MUSIQUE VON C. F. PETERS.

Pr. 18 gr.

Title page of Griepenkerl's edition of the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*

into the palm of the hand, and by this motion reveal all of their innate force and security. Every other sort of finger motion is either unnatural or allows the majority of the collaborating muscles to go unused, as for example when a finger strikes [a key] without at the same time being curved. Every operation that the hand can accomplish by this motion it succeeds in doing with ease, freedom and security, since the operation corresponds to the hand's natural inclination.

This mechanism of the hand described above is employed most completely when striking keys upon keyboard instruments. Both rows of upper and lower keys [i.e., accidentals and naturals] lie parallel to each other in two level surfaces, the one over the other, and all the keys in each row are equally long and broad. The fingers, however, are of unequal length. This circumstance already makes the bending of the fingers necessary to the degree that they all rest upon an even surface and equidistant from each other with the tips in a relatively straight line. With most hands it is possible only with force to place the fingertips in a perfectly straight line, and a slight arc is indeed advantageous, since (with the exception of the thumb) the weaker fingers are also the shorter ones and, by virtue of the mechanism of most keyboard instruments, keys may be attacked with the least expenditure of force on their forward edge, and require more and more force the further back they are struck. On the other hand, it will be very beneficial to the intended motion if the hand in every position is turned far enough inward so that every finger strikes vertically, and the joints that link the fingers to the hand do not collapse, but rather always form a straight line with the palm of the hand, the lower arm and the elbow.

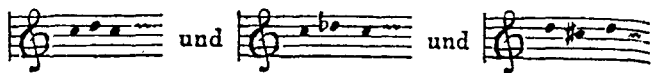
The inequality of the fingers as regards strength and flexibility, however, makes yet another artistic resource necessary, one without which no one will ever succeed (even with the greatest exertion and most persistent diligence) in overcoming the natural obstacle inherent in the weakness of the fourth and fifth fingers. J.S. Bach found this resource in the use of the weight of the hand and arm that anyone may maintain with ease and at will, either at the same degree or at a greater or lesser degree of force. No finger is too weak to serve as the point of support for this weight; the fourth and fifth fingers can bear it to the same degree as the second and third, and can transmit it to the keys with equal force, insofar as the elasticity inherent in each finger is brought into use. The most intimate connection of this elasticity with the weight of the hand in the attack is therefore the most vital component in the entire technique of keyboard performance according to Bach's method. It is achieved in the following manner:

Let one finger be placed upon a key and serve as the point of support for a finely adjusted weight of the arm, not stiffly or rigidly, but with the express intent of pulling it backward so that it instantly might be drawn in toward the hand, were it not for the moment prevented from doing this by the weight of the hand which has been proportionately intensified to counter this intent—or conversely, were the force directed toward the retraction of the finger not too weak to overcome the pressure of the arm. This position is impossible unless the wrist firmly supports the hand and maintains itself at the same height as the knuckles on the upper side of the hand; the knuckles then occupy a significantly higher position than the other joints of the fingers. The correct position may be recognized by the extended and nearly vertical placement of the little finger and by the slanting of the thumb toward the keys. No other part of the body, however, is involved in this assertion of force; the elbow joint is relaxed and the fingers not involved in playing hover quietly and loosely over the nearest keys at a distance of about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch. If this distance is very much greater, then the necessary stillness will be lacking, and a destructive and unnecessary tension will arise in its place. When a second finger (it matters not which) is ready to strike following the first one, then this intention must first consciously strengthen it, and ready it to provide continuous support, just as the first. It should then, before it strikes, already be hovering with a certain tension over the key that it is about to touch. Then the supporting force, which the first finger has previously been exerting in the way described above, must with the greatest rapidity be transferred to the second finger; this should be accomplished in no other way, than that the first [finger] be retracted with elasticity and the second spring upon the key with the same weight<sup>3</sup> [as the first]. To the degree that the mechanism described above is carried out with rapidity, security and finesse, so will each note (when it is struck) sound without any difficulty whatsoever, as if it has sprung free and unfettered out of thin air. This quality is of course exactly what is intended; it constitutes no small part of the performer's virtuosity. Whoever now is able to accomplish what I have just been describing with all the fingers of both hands in every situation, with the fingers either in normal or extended positions, and in all possible varieties

of loudness and softness, speed or slowness, staccato and slurring—all these with finesse and security and without additional bodily exertion—whoever can do this possesses the method of performance taught by J.S. Bach, as Forkel possessed it, and as many have learned it from him.

Beginners, as well as those already more accomplished, may best accustom themselves to this action in the following way.

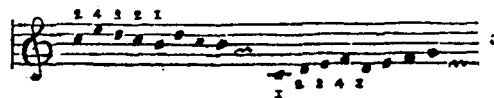
At first, so that the weight of the lower arm may operate without either any intentional pressure or lightening, the joint at the elbow must be completely relaxed and loose. In this posture, one should practice with the second and third fingers each type of adjoining notes,



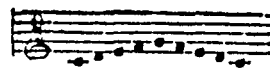
first with one hand and then with the other, until one can play them both slowly and rapidly. Then should be added to this practice the thumb with the second, the third with the fourth and the fourth with the fifth finger, without altering the position of the hand, and without trying to avoid placing the thumb and the little finger on an upper key. Next, one should add the fourth finger to the second and third, and practice passages such as these following, both ascending and descending,



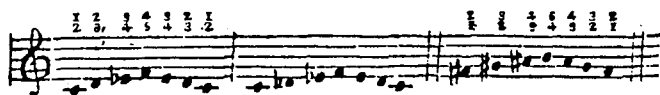
slowly at first and then gradually faster and faster, as soon as this can be accomplished without exertion. In the same fashion one should exercise the thumb, second and third fingers, as well as the third, fourth and fifth fingers, until there is no longer any difference to be noticed in the attack of the various fingers, and everything sounds to the highest degree equal and free. Only then should patterns be undertaken in which four fingers are necessary,



at first with the thumb, second, third and fourth fingers, and then with the second, third, fourth and fifth fingers; finally, patterns for all five fingers



using the transposing exercises that are to be found in almost every keyboard method book. Playing the shorter upper keys demands special practice, for which one may use the following patterns:



Finally one must practice all scales and arpeggios. The left hand should do the same exercises with its corresponding fingers, first alone, and then together with the right hand.

Should the thumb be omitted and only the other four fingers used, it must certainly never be allowed to hang down from the keyboard; rather it must always hover over the keys, as if prepared to play. Even less should the fourth and fifth fingers (if the thumb, second and third fingers are being used alone) be either drawn up high or clenched into the hand; in such circumstances they must also hover quietly over the keys at the proper distance.

After all of the exercises described above have been completed using the natural weight of the lower arm and with completely relaxed elbow joints, then one may begin to increase and decrease this weight by using either more or less pressure, controlled by the elbow joint. At first this must be uniform to the highest degree, and only then with gradual crescendos or diminuendos for every successive tone, in order to master "forte" and "piano," the ebb and flow of dynamics, without any further exertion, and especially the "forte" without striking with the fingers.<sup>4</sup>

All this preparatory training can and should, given the proper industry, zeal and talent, cost even the beginner not over two months'

time. After it, however, one must choose practice pieces by J.S. Bach himself, because few other composers give to the left hand a melody to execute. The most suitable pieces are Numbers 1 & 8 of the Two-Part Inventions, followed by Numbers 12, 11 and 5. The 32nd-note runs from the Chromatic Fantasy may also be undertaken, and other passages of this sort. However, one must first thoughtfully examine each piece that is to be practiced, carefully considering the best fingering (which is always the most comfortable), and leaving nothing dependent on chance; then one should begin with a tempo slow enough that one can be sure of being able to perform the entire piece, even the first time through, without stumbling. Greater speed will come automatically through continued practice. One also ought not to hurry on too early to a second piece, until the difficulties of the first are entirely conquered. Those who do not follow these directions will assuredly accustom themselves to "stuttering" [in performance]; it will take them twice as long to learn a piece, and even then they will never learn to play with freedom, confidence and self-assurance. It is to be noted that the clavichord (Klavier) is far better for training the hand in the beginning than the forte-piano, because one hears every mistake in touch more easily, and more depends on the performer than on the instrument. Transferring to the piano really presents no difficulties, since the touch remains the same and the forte-piano only allows greater carelessness without bringing about any significant alterations in execution. Anyone who is of a different opinion has probably not mastered the clavichord, just like all those who are only forte-piano players.

If anyone is genuinely serious about his musical training, and if he considers the most precise knowledge of all J.S. Bach's keyboard compositions to be indispensable for this purpose, then he must resolve to work through all the beginners' pieces written by this master before he ventures to undertake any of his larger works. To these beginners' pieces belong above all the Six Little Preludes for Beginners, the fifteen Two-Part Inventions and the fifteen Three-Part Inventions (Symphonien), in the order they are listed here. Whoever has all 36 of these pieces under his fingers at the same time may already consider himself a good keyboard performer, and there is little keyboard music, either new or old, that will give him much trouble. Only the four- and five-voice fugues of J.S. Bach require any special further preparation, which may be very well accomplished by the industrious and refined performance of his four-voice chorales . . .

[Here Griepenkerl begins to discuss specifically the performance and interpretation of the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, ending with these admonitions.]

Anyone who wishes to learn this piece [i.e., the fugue] with finesse, freedom and cleanness ought to accustom himself to J.S. Bach's method of fingering as taught by his son C.P.E. Bach, according to which the fingers are best ordered to perform the music with the greatest ease. One may use the thumb and the little finger on the shorter upper keys as often as is useful and necessary; one may pass any shorter finger under a longer one, and any longer one over a shorter one, in spite of the narrow-minded, limiting rules of many a recent theoretician.<sup>5</sup> J.S. Bach indeed wrote practice pieces for this sort of fingering, of which the fifth two-part invention is an example, to accustom the thumb and the little finger to the accidentals. Furthermore, there are very few of Bach's larger keyboard works that can be performed easily and well without this sort of fingering . . .

Braunschweig, April 10, 1819  
F. GRIEPENKERL

#### COMMENTARY

Griepenkerl's essay is a commentary on and an expansion of the account of Bach's keyboard performance that Forkel gave in his biography of Bach. It views the subject not so much from a new vantage point but through a finer lens. In this connection it is interesting to note that Griepenkerl on the title page of the edition traced his musical lineage from J.S. Bach to Forkel through W.F. Bach, not C.P.E. Bach. This suggests several interesting possibilities. First, Forkel may actually have studied keyboard performance with W.F. Bach (though he did not claim this in his book). Second, there may have been a difference of opinion between Bach's two eldest sons on certain particulars of their father's technique, namely:

1. The release of notes by drawing the tips of the fingers inward toward the palm of the hand. This technique is mentioned by J.J. Quantz,<sup>6</sup> and described in detail by Forkel;<sup>7</sup> C.P.E. Bach, however, never mentioned it. Although Forkel never said whence his information came, he took C.P.E. Bach to task for omitting mention of it.<sup>8</sup> Griepenkerl's

title page seems to confirm what has seemed an obvious possibility—that Forkel's source was W.F. Bach.

2. The use of the thumb and fifth finger on upper keys. C.P.E. Bach suggested avoiding this wherever possible.<sup>9</sup> Although Forkel was silent on the subject, Griepenkerl unequivocally promoted the use of these fingers on upper keys, and credited J.S. Bach with composing pieces to accustom these fingers to this practice.

How credible is Griepenkerl's information? Here arguments can be adduced pro and con. Griepenkerl's credibility is weakened because he was writing almost 70 years after J.S. Bach's death, and at least twice removed from him as regards keyboard instruction. Furthermore, although Forkel certainly gained much information for his book from both of Bach's eldest sons, it is not clear whether Forkel actually studied keyboard performance with W.F. Bach, and how long he studied.

On the other hand, Griepenkerl revealed himself in his essay as a true conservative: he still advocated earlier fingering methods, and promoted the use of the clavichord (in 1819!) as being better than the pianoforte for the development of technique. Furthermore, both Forkel and Griepenkerl were among the fathers of modern musicology. Their methods of research and editing were far in advance of their time, and their sober, honest scholarship is still a model for modern research. There seems to be little likelihood that either of them perpetrated any fabrication of information, either intentional or unwitting. Finally, their discussions of Bach's keyboard technique are reasonable in their particulars, and agree in general and in most details with earlier accounts. At the least, what Griepenkerl had to say is a logical extension of J.S. Bach's teaching. At best, it may represent a report essentially accurate in every detail. The truth probably lies somewhere between these extremes.

How does Griepenkerl's account expand or refine our knowledge of J.S. Bach's keyboard technique? First, of course, his is the most explicit, precise description we possess. Elements of technique that we can deduce from C.P.E. Bach or Forkel are here spelled out in considerable detail, beginning with an explanation of the prehensile nature of the human hand that provides a rational basis for Bach's unique method of releasing notes. Of particular significance is Griepenkerl's insistence on the use of the weight of the arm, achieved through the corresponding minimum tension of all muscles except those of the finger depressing the key. The concept that the finger in use should support the weight of the arm encourages a relaxed, tension-free manner of performance (especially when playing contrapuntal music). Finally, the specific exercises that Griepenkerl suggested for use preparatory to the study of pieces are not only interesting, but useful. Forkel mentioned these,<sup>10</sup> but did not provide them. These exercises are probably Forkel's, though the idea behind them may stem from W.F. Bach and even from J.S. Bach himself.

#### NOTES

1. "Bachs Klaviertechnik," in *Het Orgel*, 79e jaargang, no. 1, Jan. 1983, pp. 2-15. The same author published an abstract of the article, complete with the entire Griepenkerl text, as "Eine Quelle zu Bachs Klaviertechnik," in *Ans Organi*, 31. Jahrgang, Heft 1, March 1983, pp. 21-25.
2. *Chromatische Fantasie für das Pianoforte* von Johann Sebastian Bach. Neue Ausgabe mit einer Bezeichnung ihres wahren Vortrags, wie derselbe von J.S. Bach auf W. Friedemann Bach, von diesem auf Forkel und von Forkel auf seine Schüler gekommen (*Chromatic Fantasy for the Pianoforte* by Johann Sebastian Bach. New Edition with a description of its true performance, as this [has] come from J.S. Bach to W. Friedemann Bach, from him to Forkel and from Forkel to his students). Leipzig, im Bureau de Musique von C.F. Peters [1819?]. The L.C. Music Division owns two copies, but only the case copy has the postscript: call number M25.B case. I am much indebted to William Parsons, of the L.C. Music Division staff, for his patient help in locating this score for me.
3. Taken literally, Griepenkerl's instructions could produce a modern legato, a touch the evidence on fingering from other earlier sources will not sustain. Griepenkerl's approach does, however, strongly support a smooth, cantabile style of performance, in agreement with other accounts of Bach's keyboard performance.
4. Here Griepenkerl is referring not so much to the pianoforte as to the clavichord, as he makes clear later in the essay.
5. Griepenkerl here explicitly defended these earlier fingering practices, contradicting writers such as J.C.F. Rellstab, D.G. Türk and A.E. Müller. See: Q. Faulkner, *J.S. Bach's Keyboard Technique* (Concordia, 1984), p. 38.
6. J.J. Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (1752), XVII, vi, paragraph 18.
7. J.N. Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (1802), pp. 12-13.
8. C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen* (1753), Part I, p. 12.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 22 and 37.
10. Forkel, *op. cit.*, p. 38.