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April 1980

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Faulkner, Quentin, "J. S. Bach's Keyboard Fingering: New Evidence" (1980). *Faculty Publications: School of Music*. 22.

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J. S. Bach's Keyboard Fingering: New Evidence

by Quentin Faulkner

There is presently considerable interest among scholars and performers of early music in early keyboard fingering practices and their effect on the music's articulation and phrasing. This is nowhere more evident than in the current reconsideration of J. S. Bach's keyboard music in the light of primary source material on his keyboard fingering. The primary sources available to us up to now are three in number:

1. *Applicatio* (BWV 994)
2. *Praeambulum* (BWV 928)

Both of these works are found in the *Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*.¹ They both offer some insight into Bach's fingering practices, but neither tells us all we might wish. The "*Applicatio*" is a simple piece (aside from the trills specified for the fourth and fifth fingers), obviously composed to show normal fingering practice without presenting difficulties which would necessitate creative or unusual solutions. The "*Praeambulum*" consists mostly of arpeggiated figures which have always necessitated the equal use of all fingers, and thus belong equally to early as well as to modern fingering practices. Both of these are technically simple pieces with sparse textures, bearing no substantial resemblance to Bach's complex and technically difficult contrapuntal works.

3. *Praeludium und Fughetta in C-dur* (BWV 870a)

An early version of Prelude and Fugue I from the second part of *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier*, this source is undoubtedly the most complete and helpful in gaining an understanding of Bach's fingering practices. The prelude is in four-voice counterpoint, the fugue in three-voice counterpoint, and the prelude in particular is endowed with a number of technical difficulties which are solved with some unique and creative fingerings. This third source is extant only in a printed copy, in Vol. 36 of the Bach Gesellschaft Ausgabe, pp. 224-5. This volume's editor, Ernst Naumann (writing in 1890), stated that the fingerings are "original,"² but there is some doubt as to whether he means "in Bach's own hand" or "contemporary with the manuscript, not added later." The source is undoubtedly close to Bach (perhaps given by Bach to a student), but unfortunately the manuscript is lost,³ and there is no way at present to determine its precise degree of authenticity.

During recent research into Bach's keyboard fingering practices, I had occasion to examine Johann Philipp Kirnberger's *Clavierübungen mit der Bachischen Applicatur*.⁴ This publication has yielded yet another piece which throws considerable light on Bach's keyboard fingering, and which corroborates the value of source 3 above as a highly accurate indication of this fingering.

Kirnberger (1721–83) was a student of J. S. Bach, apparently from 1739–41.⁵ After holding numerous lesser positions in Germany and Poland, he secured the post of court musician to Princess Anna Amalia, sister of Frederick the Great of Prussia, becoming her teacher and musical adviser until his death. A friend of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, he was one of J. S. Bach's most ardent disciples,⁶ at times his respect verged on the fanatical.⁷ His purpose in publishing the four volumes (or "collec-

tions," as he called them) of the *Clavierübungen mit der Bachischen Applicatur* he made clear in the opening sentence of the foreword to the first collection:

The collector of the following keyboard exercises has the intention to be useful to beginners, in that he puts into their hands a series of keyboard pieces which begin with the very easiest, and proceed to the most difficult, by which he indicates to them at the same time the best and most comfortable fingering ["Applicatur"].

Later in this foreword, however, he made it clear that the adjective "Bachischen" in his title does not refer specifically to J. S. Bach:

Since the fingering in the following pieces is based on the instruction of the famous Mr. Bach in his *Wahren Art das Clavier zu spielen* [i.e., C. P. E. Bach], it would be advisable for both teachers and students who make use of these pieces to have this excellent work continually at hand, in order to become acquainted with the rules which it contains. His method is the easiest, most comfortable and most complete; by means of it both students and teachers may arrive at their ultimate goal by the shortest path.

C. P. E. Bach implied that his fingering practices were based on his father's concepts and instruction,⁸ but Philipp Spitta in his biography of J. S. Bach already noted that the type of fingerings taught by the son did not accord with those in the extant pieces fingered by the father.⁹ Examination of the works fingered by Kirnberger reveal that almost all of them dutifully follow the rules given in C. P. E. Bach's *Essay* and thus stand in contradiction to the fingering practices evident in the sources from J. S. Bach. The pieces in Kirnberger's four collections are almost entirely short dances and other lighter pieces in the then-fashionable *galant* style: essentially homophonic works with sparse textures (either two or three voices), as well as many arpeggiated figures and rapid scalar passages. Thus in both their substance as well as their fingering they stand closer to the works and ideas of C. P. E. Bach than of J. S. Bach.

There is, however, one piece in Kirnberger's publication which stands quite apart from its fellows. It is entitled "Allabreve", and is by a "Mr. Holland."¹⁰ This work is found on pp. 14 & 15 of the third collection. It is actually a fugue (a rather old-fashioned one by J. S. Bach's standards), notated in longer note values, and its texture is definitely that of an earlier era. Kirnberger fingered the piece completely throughout (see the facsimile printed with this article).

There are two difficulties which must be resolved in order to understand fully the fingering indications. First, the score has the indications "Ped." and "Man." at various points under the bass staff. These designate the work for performance on the organ (the only work in the four collections so specified), but do not mean that the feet should replace the hands at any point. Either Kirnberger intended to provide for performance with or without pedals (perhaps the most logical possibility), or he wanted the performer to double the lowest voice with the pedals at certain points. Second, it is not always immediately clear to which hand the finger numerals refer. Careful study of the score can resolve these difficulties, however, and the captions under each facsimile page are given as an aid to their resolution.

The fingering found in this "Allabreve" is quite unlike that applied to other pieces in the collections. It is far closer to the three sources from J. S. Bach, and especially to source 3. This similarity strongly buttresses the claim for source 3 as an authoritative indication of Bach's fingering practices. Briefly summarized, here are the characteristics of this type of fingering:

1. Frequent skipping of fingers, especially the outer ones on both hands, but also others.
2. Very infrequent use of substitution.

3. The constant and free intermingling of earlier and more modern modes of fingering.
4. A number of fingering peculiarities which on first glance seem ridiculous, but upon inspection and experiment prove to be brilliantly suited to overcoming the difficulties present (*e.g.*, mm. 14-15, bass; m. 19, bass; m. 30, treble).

On the basis of the fingerings found in this piece, as well as the three sources already known, a number of tentative theses may be postulated concerning the ways in which Bach's keyboard fingering differs from modern fingering practices:

1. The frequency of skipped fingers, as well as instances of early fingering, need to temper our notions of Bach's "legato" manner of playing.¹¹ That his playing gave a singing legato impression cannot be doubted, but it was evidently somewhat more articulate in the flow from one tone to another than is the case in modern legato playing.¹²

2. The very infrequent use of substitution in the "Allabreve" (two instances m.m. 23 & 71) accords well with source 3 (one instance, on a pedal point). The presence of two substitutions actually strengthens the argument against constant substitution, since it is clear that Kirnberger did not condone its indiscriminate use by not notating it, but rather showed precisely those few spots where he felt it useful.¹³

3. It does not appear to be the case that Bach, as his style matured and became more technically complex and diverse, abandoned earlier fingering practices learned in his youth. He rather expanded upon them, adding new techniques while at the same time retaining the old. Furthermore, the "Allabreve" fingered by Kirnberger is almost certain indication that Bach transmitted this type of fingering to his students.

4. What is perhaps the most startling aspect of the close juxtaposition of the "Allabreve" and the *galant* pieces in Kirnberger's collections is that they point to the simultaneous existence of two different modes of fingering, each employed according to the style and texture of the work it is to serve.¹⁴ The more complex contrapuntal works resist any systematized method of fingering, and thus call for a more 'free-wheeling' type of fingering. The *galant* pieces, on the other hand, with their more stereotyped scalar passages and ornamental figures, invite systematization; their lightness and rapidity, moreover, make a smooth, facile execution (in which the thumb frequently passes under other fingers) highly desirable. It appears likely, then, that C. P. E. Bach was quite correct in implying that the fingering concepts explained in the *Essay* represent his father's fingering practices. They represent, however, only one portion, one facet of those practices. He did not transmit to his readers the method of fingering his father's dense contrapuntal works. This method was gradually abandoned and forgotten, first because it resists systematization and is therefore difficult to explain in words, and second, because the contrapuntal works were by then old-fashioned and no longer performed.

Notes

1. Presently in the Library of the School of Music, Yale University. Facsimile edition edited by Ralph Kirkpatrick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959, pp. 9 & 20).
2. Vorwort, p. XCIV: "Durch den beigefügten Originalfingersatz sind beide besonders interessant."
3. Wolfgang Schmieder, *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1950), p. 509, lists the manuscript as having disappeared.
4. *Sammlungen*, published in 1761, 1762, 1763, and 1766 in Berlin by Friedrich Wilhelm Birnstiel. The U.S. Library of Congress owns the first three *Sammlungen* of the set.
5. The exact duration of his apprenticeship with Bach is uncertain. See *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 7, col. 951.

6. His regard for his teacher may be perceived in various statements translated in the *Bach Reader*, edited by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966).
7. See the anecdote related by C. F. Zeiter, in the *Bach Reader*, pp. 291-2.
8. C. P. E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, translated and edited by William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), p. 42.
9. Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, translated by Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), pp. 38-9. Spitta based his remarks on sources 1 & 2 above; he was apparently unfamiliar with source 3.
10. This composer is too obscure for precise identification; J. G. Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732) notes that a Christoph Holland "ist ein Kayserlicher [*i.e.*, at the Imperial Court in Vienna] Musicus, und Komponist gewesen."
11. *Bach Reader*, p. 186n.
12. Forkel bears witness to Bach's distinctness in the production of single tones in a series: *Bach Reader*, p. 307.
13. In conjunction with this see C. P. E. Bach's caution on the use of substitution. *Essay*, p. 72.
14. C. P. E. Bach hints at this distinction between two types of fingering in the *Essay*, p. 42, paragraph 6.

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14 *Allabreve.*

Par Mr. HOLLAND.

The musical score is for a piece titled "Par Mr. HOLLAND." in the tempo "Allabreve." It is written for two staves, Treble and Bass, with figured bass notation. The piece is in G major and 2/4 time. The score is divided into four systems. The first system has 8 measures, the second 8 measures, the third 8 measures, and the fourth 8 measures. The piece ends with a double bar line. The manuscript is from the third collection of Johann Philipp Kirnberger's "Clavierübungen mit der Bachischen Applicatur".

Johann Philipp Kirnberger: *Clavierübungen mit der Bachischen Applicatur*, third collection, page 14 (courtesy of United States Library of Congress). In measures 8-10, 12-13, 15, 19, 37, and 44-51, upper notes on the bass clef are taken by the right hand. The lower treble-clef note in m. 25 is taken by the left hand. Substitution is indicated in the upper note of the left hand, m. 23. The binding of the book appears around both pages.

15

Man.

Man.

Johann Philipp Kirnberger: *Clavierübungen mit der Bachischen Applicatur*, third collection, page 15 (courtesy of United States Library of Congress). In measures 57, 59-61, 62-63, 64-69, 71-77, 80, and 85-87, lower notes on the treble clef are taken by the left hand. The upper bass clef notes in m. 93-95 are taken by the right hand. The left hand part of m. 71 indicates substitution, and the lower "3" in m. 82 belongs to the bass-clef note.