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BACH TRANSCRIBED:
A Study in Two Parts

by Pamela Nash

Part One looks at the art of Bach's transcription and examines his compositional processes in the keyboard version of the A minor violin Sonata (BWV 1003). Part Two, appearing in the next issue of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano*, will explore the possibilities for further transcriptions for harpsichord based on Bach's principles.

"....I have learned that in regard to all the [other] problems of Bach interpretation, we achieve much better results when we do not try to confine the master's works to the traditional rules of the baroque era....These rules should be accepted as a basis for Bach performance only insofar as they are verified by unambiguous facts from Bach's writing methods."[1]

Erwin Bodky

Bodky was writing about Bach forty years ago at a time when the 'old school' performance establishment was still in place; yet his words have much the same resonance today as they had then. We still "achieve much better results when we do not try to confine the master's works to the traditional rules of the Baroque era", and the most important insights into Bach's music can still be gained from the actual notes themselves - "the unambiguous facts of Bach's writing methods".

One of the most fascinating sources of insight into Bach's work is the instrumental transcription, particularly that which he practised with his own works. The study of Bach's methods in this genre is highly revealing, bringing us closer to some of the more practical, as well as playful, aspects of his thinking, and revealing the extent to which his compositional style was influenced by instrumental and technical factors. Moreover, the continuing practice of transcribing Bach - particularly from the solo string music as demonstrated by Leonhardt and others - has provided the harpsichord, lute and guitar with new Bach repertoire.

However, despite the gathering momentum in Bach scholarship over recent years, this area of his work has received limited recognition from scholars and performers alike. Bach himself has created for us the ultimate precedent in the art of transcription, and it would be incomprehensible to him today that such a practice is seen by serious musicians as anachronistic to current authentic ideology. On the contrary, Bach would regard the exploration and propagation of his example as a real and contemporary context for the authentic expression of his music.

By his own demonstration, we know something of how Bach thought and how he 'heard' his music; certainly we know that his conception of music was often not intrinsic to any one instrumental sound or idiom. The baroque trend for transferring musical material from one instrumental medium to another was merely a catalyst for Bach's systematic experimentation with his own music, and his desire to explore every aspect of a work's potential outweighed any consideration of preserving its original purpose and instrumentation. The publication of his keyboard music afforded him the opportunity to revise it in the process of recopying. However, since the instrumental and vocal works were considered too sophisticated for general usage to be published, it would be logical to assume that his revisionary practices, so systematic with the keyboard works, did not apply to the violin music because there was no practical reason for doing so. Therefore, 'recycling' a work for the keyboard perhaps offered Bach a different form of distribution, and thereby extending its shelf-life, if you will.

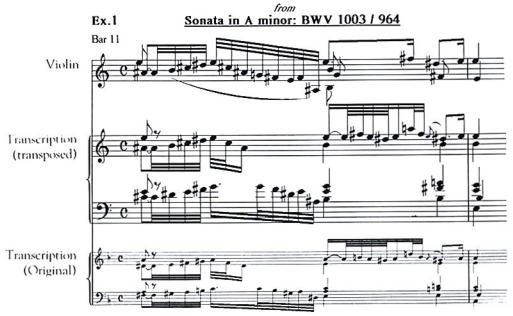
Transcription was perhaps a technical as well as practical issue. It must be said that there are problems in performing Bach's polyphonic writing on a single melody instrument; the violin works in particular contain extremely difficult technical hurdles and double and multiple stopping which are often awkward-sounding. Had there been more access to these works in Bach's time, one can imagine their notoriety amongst violinists!

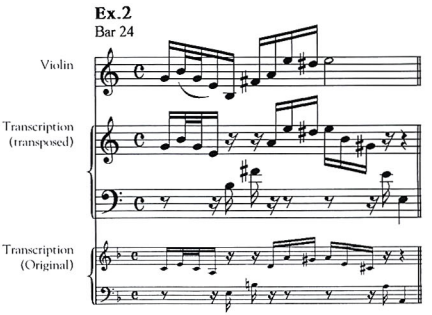
From a compositional standpoint, the limitations of fingering and strings in the violin precluded the coexistence of complex melodic and harmonic structures, and restricted the possibilities for contrapuntal activity. C P E Bach, in a letter to Forkel, alluded to his father's compositional procedures with the instrumental works: "If I exclude some of his clavier pieces, he composed everything else without instrument, but later tried it out on one".[2] We may surmise then, that some of Bach's original ideas would have surpassed instrumental constraints, and that the violin score itself must have undergone some simplification and adaptation of these ideas. More importantly, we know that Bach often played his violin solos on the clavichord, where, in an unrestricted context, he would have freely and spontaneously adapted the music - "adding as much in the nature of harmony as he found necessary. In so doing, he recognised the necessity of a sounding harmony, such as in compositions of this sort he could not more fully achieve" - as J F Agricola recalled in 1774.[3]

The culmination of what could fully be achieved, and the quintessential example of Bach's art of transcription, is the keyboard version (BWV 964) of the a minor Sonata in four movements for solo violin (BWV 1003). By comparing both versions of the Sonata, we can see how Bach uses the full resources of the keyboard to realise those elements which are inherent in, and implied by, the original, and how he further clarifies and supports the musical structure.

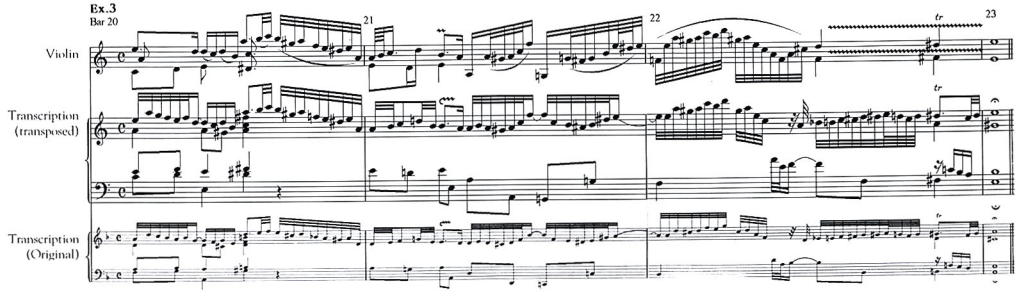
[*N.B.* Bach's transcription is transposed down a fifth to the key of d minor in order to occupy a more suitable tessitura for the keyboard. For the sake of comparison, all keyboard examples are transposed back into the key of a minor.]

It is significant that although the melodic line of the original work is highly violinistic, the transferral of its idiom to that of the keyboard loses none of the improvisatory character of the melody, and on the whole preserves its structural contour. Those melodic changes which do occur in the transcription tend toward greater elaboration, such as the embellishments at cadential points. Whilst the function of added ornamentation is in part to compensate for lack of tonal sustain, it appears not as mere superimposition onto the melodic line, but as a seamless integration into it, just as it is in parallel contexts in the solo keyboard works. Bach exploits many opportunities to add keyboardistic ornamental figuration, decorating simple figures with turns, arpeggio devices and neighbouring note 'fillers'. The ornament in Bar 11 of the opening Adagio [marked *Grave* in the original] *(Ex.1)*, and the cadential arpeggiated figure in Bar 24 of the Allegro *(Ex.2)*, illustrate two such additions.

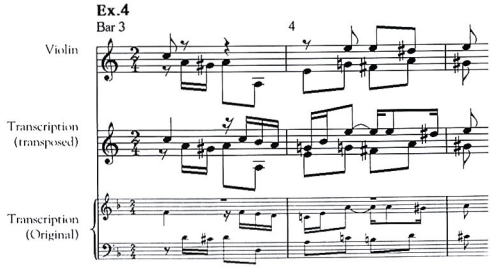


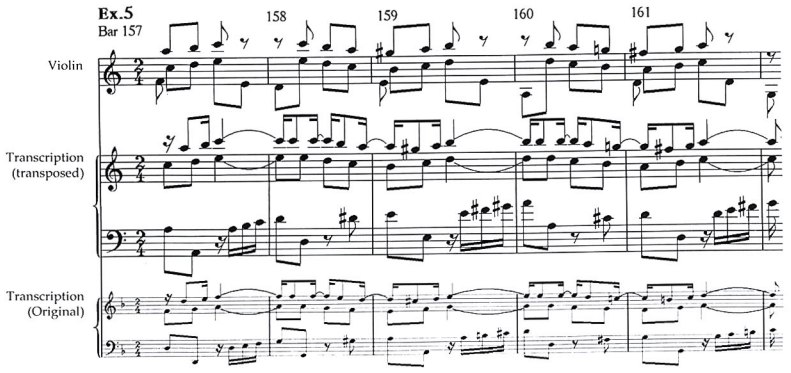


In the final four bars of the Adagio *(Ex. 3)*, Bach demonstrates a more extended type of melodic revision. The implied two-part texture is realised with the use of tied values and a 'completed' bass, and in the penultimate bar a compound ornament is further embellished by a chromatic figure, in addition to the counterpoint in the left hand.

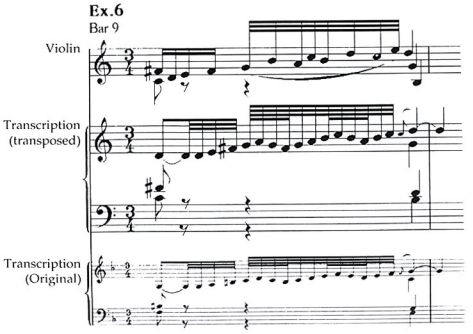


Throughout the Fugue, Bach uses melodic extensions wherever possible. In Bars 3-4 *(Ex. 4)*, he provides the right hand with a more active rhythmic counter-subject to the left hand's subject.

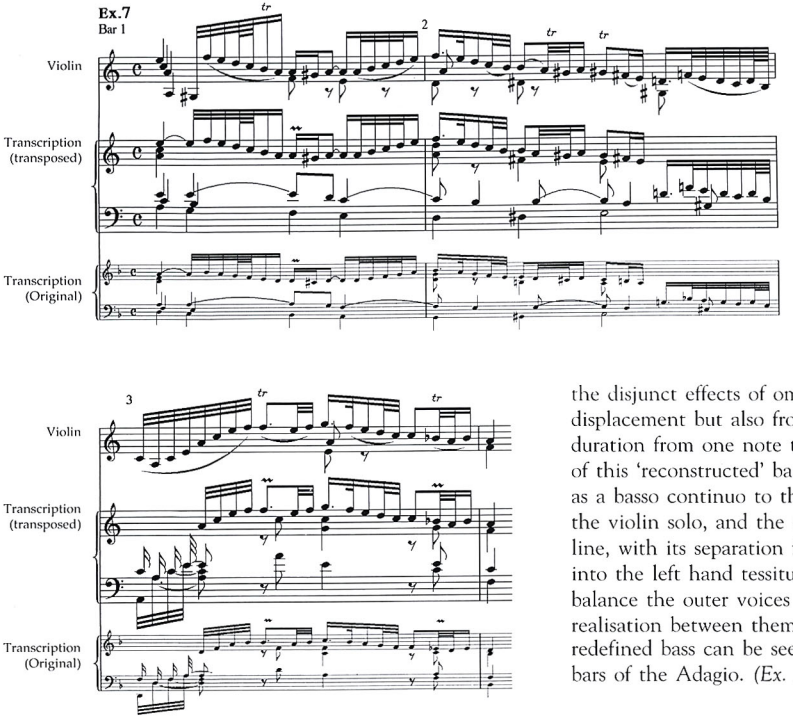




Rhythmic adaptation of the melodic line is most evident in the Fugue. One of its functions is to maintain continuity of movement, for instance in Bars 157-161 *(Ex. 5)*, where the parallel sixths are off-set by a sixteenth-note, creating a more resonant harmonic, as well as rhythmic, effect.

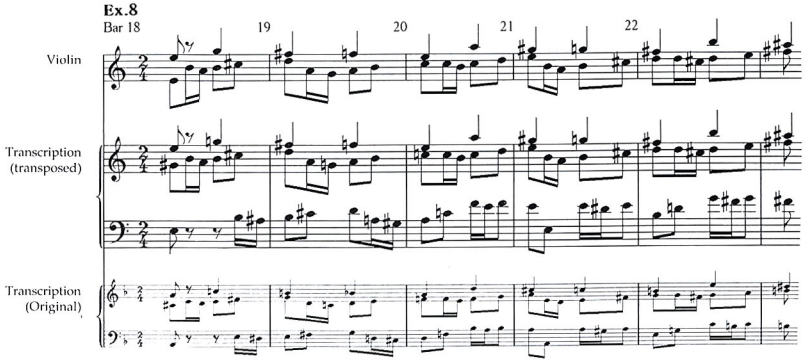


In those places where the original line would sound empty and unidiomatic on the keyboard, Bach does not hesitate to alter the actual contour of the melody, as in bar 9 of the Andante. *(Ex. 6)*



The original bass line uses the common baroque practice of transposing by octave wherever necessary, dictated by the technical constraints of the instrument. In the transcription, the bass is developed into a complete melodic entity, freed not only from the disjunct effects of omissions and octave displacement but also from the problem of duration from one note to the next. The role of this 'reconstructed' bass could in fact be seen as a basso continuo to the melodic element of the violin solo, and the ensuing continuity of line, with its separation from the main melody into the left hand tessitura, serves both to balance the outer voices and to allow harmonic realisation between them. An example of a redefined bass can be seen in the first three bars of the Adagio. *(Ex. 7)*

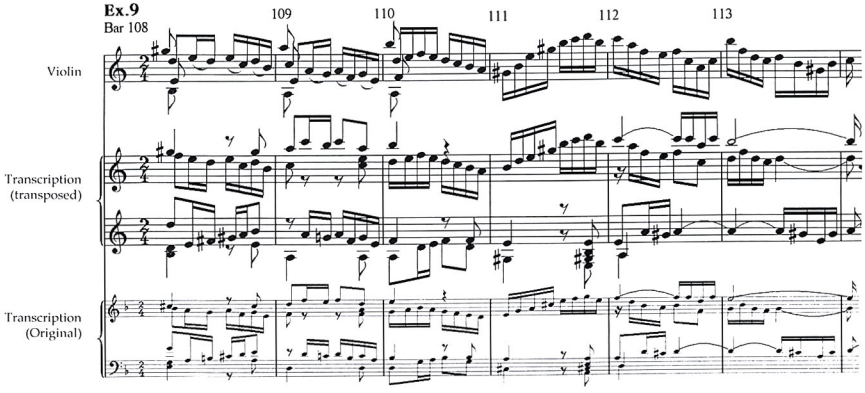
Ex.8
Bar 18



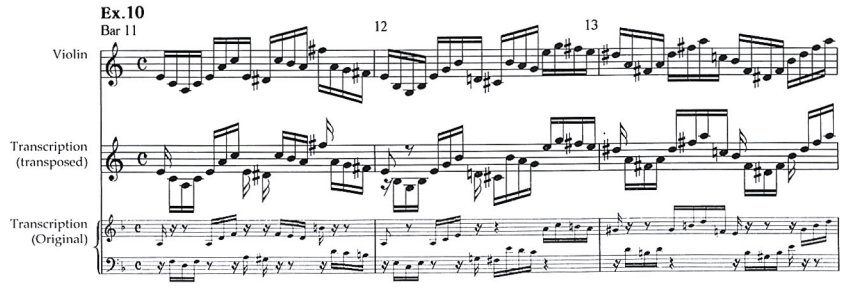
In the Fugue, the bass line has a contrapuntal, as well as 'continuo' bass function. Bach seems to take every opportunity to create new material in the left hand, such as the added imitative counterpoint in Bars 18-27. *(Ex. 8)* Here, as in many places throughout the Fugue, Bach makes a rhythmic play on the second subject with the addition of a third voice. The harmonic significance of this counterpoint is striking; for instance, the imitation at the octave on the upbeats of Bars 19 and 20, with leading note accidentals, changes the downbeat chords from major to relative minor. This partly incidental result of the counterpoint is recalled more deliberately at Bars 21 to 22 where Bach re-affirms the minor with a descending fourth in the added bass voice.

The Fugue indeed undergoes the greatest revision of all the movements, and is a fascinating exposé of the most intellectual of Bach's processes in the transcription. Unlike the slow movements, where the violin is more able to sustain both harmonic and melodic structures at the same time, the Fugue in its original form is necessarily a much more simplified 'reduction' of potential polyphonic activity. The degree of complexity in developing this potential in the transcription produces a highly idiomatic and technically exacting piece of keyboard writing. The profuse contrapuntal activity intensifies the energy and the textural dimension of the movement, whilst extensive use of many other keyboardistic devices creates a greater coherence of line and rhythm.

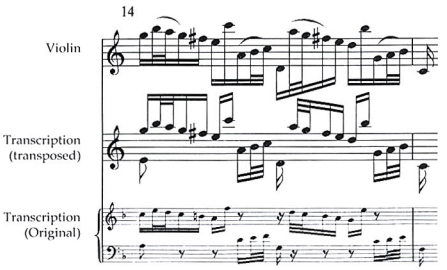
Ex.9
Bar 108



Bars 108-113 *(Ex. 9)* further illustrate Bach's approach in exploiting the flexibility of keyboard resources. He chooses not to preserve the integrity of the original line in Bars 109 and 110, but rather to revise it by adding counterpoint, first above the original treble, then below, and going on to derive further counterpoint from the single lines in Bars 111 to 113.



Of all the movements of the Sonata, the final Allegro is the most musically self-contained for the violin, and yet also the most easily adaptable for the keyboard. Since its harmonic and melodic components are not simultaneous, the single-line texture is mostly preserved and divided into alternating right and left hand 'channels'. Bars 11-15 *(Ex. 10)* demonstrate that the simplicity of this linear texture combined with the toccata-like figuration relates to Bach's writing in parts of the solo harpsichord works.



A natural outcome of this kind of writing is that it generates considerable speed and brilliance of touch on the harpsichord. It is perhaps poignant in this final movement that the instant conformity of the keyboard results from the simplest possible transcription of the violin, and yet with the emphasis on aspects of keyboard technique - the articulate execution of the notes and the velocity of the fingers - rather than on the technical assimilation of the violin writing.

This brief comparative analysis of the Sonata shows just a few of Bach's processes in achieving the perfect 'crossover' exercise. Each movement demonstrates a different way in which the keyboard can take on the identity of the violin, copying its range and idiomatic character, yet at times surpassing it with the rhetoric of its own idiomatic language. Moreover, these comparisons give rise to questions about the life cycle of the transcription: was the more complex, idiomatic keyboard language implicit when Bach conceived the work, or did it come about at the time of the transcription? Since Bach's compositional conception was often independent of its receiving instrument, and since the process of later trying out the work on the violin involved necessary modification, might the violin version be viewed as the true adaptation or 'reduction' of the work? And is it therefore its realisation - the transcription - which represents the original conception, bringing the work full circle, as it were? Whilst this is not to imply that Bach saw the violin version as a poor relation to the transcription, it is nevertheless logical to assume that many of its musical possibilities, as exemplified in the transcription, had always been in Bach's mind.

In terms of performance on the harpsichord, the Sonata has of course a greater independence from the violin than that which Bach's transcription reveals. The contrasts in instrumental and dynamic properties between the violin and the harpsichord will produce distinctly different results, not just in sound but in interpretation, determining articulation, pace and other stylistic elements. Indeed, the definition of the pulse itself will vary between the two instruments, not least because the harpsichord is regulated by the continuity of the bass-line. It is surprising that in the light of occupying such a significant place in Bach's thinking, the Sonata transcription has not yet occupied its place alongside Bach's other solo works in the harpsichord recital repertoire. Perhaps it will come to be perceived not as an illegitimate offspring of Bach's keyboard oeuvre, but as an important and *bona fide* contribution to it - in addition to being a fascinating lesson in transcription.

Part Two of this study will explore the territory of new Bach harpsichord transcriptions - a version for two harpsichords of the E Major Partita and a solo version of the D Minor Partita - against the backdrop of Bach's keyboard, lute and concerto transcriptions, which will be brought to bear in finding clues, solutions and parameters in the pursuit of Bach's example.

Notes:

1. Erwin Bodky. *The Interpretation of Bach's Keyboard Works* (Harvard University Press, 1960) preface: v
2. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, editors. *The Bach Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966) p.278
3. *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 32, p.527 in *The Bach Reader*, p.447

Pamela Nash is a harpsichordist and freelance writer on music. Her two-part interview with Jane Chapman appeared in the last two issues of Harpsichord & Fortepiano.