

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# 'Because they could never have equaled their father in his style': creativity at the keyboard in the Bach family

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In the first book-length biography of Johann Sebastian Bach, the author, Johann Nicolaus Forkel, reported that the composer's two oldest sons had 'been forced to choose styles of their own because they could never have equaled their father in his'.<sup>1</sup> Not only Friedemann and Emanuel Bach, but also their much younger half-brother Christian, wrote keyboard music that differs fundamentally from their father's. Largely abandoning both fugue and French dance movements, they laboured chiefly in new genres of keyboard composition, such as the sonata and the free fantasia. In these works, their father's contrapuntal and often highly dissonant keyboard writing gave way to new types of melody, figuration and accompaniment. They also turned away from the organ and harpsichord toward the clavichord and the fortepiano, adopting new approaches to both performance and composition better suited to these instruments. It is nevertheless possible to understand their diverse works as continuing a family tradition.

Almost any of Sebastian's keyboard pieces could serve for comparison with the work of his sons; we might consider one of his less well-known compositions, the Fantasia and Fugue in A minor BWV904. This must be a relatively early work, composed no later than around 1712, to judge from its use of rather free counterpoint to fill out quite rigorous, even schematic designs.<sup>2</sup> In style it is close to the organ music that was Bach's main concern at the time, and at least the first movement might even have been conceived as an organ piece, as suggested by the sustained sonorities present from the beginning. Yet both movements lack a pedal part, and they are equally likely to represent Sebastian's transfer of organ style to the harpsichord (ex.1).



Ex.1 J. S. Bach, Fantasia in A minor, BWV904/1, b.1-4

The fugue, in addition, illustrates an important principle of Sebastian's music: that counterpoint and the working out of compositional ideas take precedence over the player's convenience. Many passages lie uncomfortably beneath the hands; neither movement could have been imagined by a composer who simply wrote down things previously worked out at the keyboard. For instance, several entries of the main fugue subject in the inner voice cross the upper part and must be divided awkwardly between the hands

(ex.2). Such passages might have struck some of Bach's contemporaries as impossible to play; even for the best musician, this music can never be immediately easy or gratifying to perform.



Ex.2 J. S. Bach, Fugue in A minor, BWV904/2, b.25-29

Similar observations apply to Sebastian's organ music, which incorporated pedal parts of unprecedented independence, making for a richer and more complex texture than was previously thought possible in keyboard music. Having discovered how to write (and play) such music for organ, Sebastian echoed it in his harpsichord pieces. Many of these imitate the notational appearance and sound of organ compositions, and it is unlikely that the composer could have conceived either movement of BWV904 without his organ music in the background. The fugue, in particular, often echoes the pedal writing of an organ fugue, as when the main subject enters in the bass, initiating the final section of the piece and sounding like a climactic entry played on the pedals (ex.3).



Ex.3 J. S. Bach, Fugue in A minor, BWV904/2, b.61-67

None of Sebastian's sons is known to have composed any significant organ music. Nevertheless, the oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann was a famous organ virtuoso, and occasionally his keyboard music seems to imitate organ writing, with pedal parts.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the clearest instance of this occurs in a fantasia that was apparently composed, or at least assembled, in 1770.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the rigorously designed fantasia of BWV904, with its regular alternation of ritornello and episodes, Friedemann's Fantasia in E minor (F20) resembles several of his other works of this type in consisting of what seem to be fragments of now-lost compositions, rearranged and re-ordered. One recurring passage might have come from an organ trio, with a pedal part; it can be played as written only if both hands make unaccustomed leaps, dividing the inner voice between the two hands even more awkwardly than in any of Sebastian's fugues (ex.4).<sup>5</sup>



Ex.4 W. F. Bach, Fantasia in E minor, F.20, b.55–58 (fingerings added)

Although not fugal, this composition is pervasively contrapuntal. Two other recurring passages are much easier for the performer, yet these too are written quite strictly in three parts, recalling the trio sonatas which Sebastian had imitated in his six organ sonatas.<sup>6</sup> The latter represent only one of many textures found in Sebastian's keyboard music. Nearly all Friedemann's keyboard writing, on the other hand, is in the same three-part texture, which can be traced back to the Sinfonias (three-part inventions) which his father composed for him in the early 1720s.

This is one reason why it is difficult to identify Friedemann's keyboard music with any particular type of keyboard instrument, even though two of his fantasias may have been intended for the clavichord.<sup>7</sup> Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach famously declared that the clavichord is the best keyboard instrument on which to judge a player.<sup>8</sup> This statement is often interpreted to mean that the clavichord was Emanuel's favourite instrument, a claim that has also been made for Sebastian Bach.<sup>9</sup> It seems unlikely that Sebastian had a single preferred instrument, and for Friedemann we simply have no documentary basis for knowing his opinion on the matter. Emanuel Bach, however, certainly cultivated an expressive style that was increasingly idiomatic to one instrument, the clavichord. Composed over a span of more than half a century, Emanuel's keyboard music - far more than Friedemann's - reveals an evolving approach to writing for the keyboard, tending toward a relatively simple texture in which the two hands are often limited to a singing melody and a bass line or plain chords.

This idiom, which is ideal for the clavichord, reflected the high aesthetic value placed on simplicity as a positive feature of music in 18th-century Berlin. Emanuel Bach spent the greatest part of his career in that city, where he was one of many musicians working for Prussian king Frederick the Great. Emanuel's keyboard music is not exactly simple, nor is it easy to play, but it avoids the ostentatious virtuosity and the counterpoint of both his father's and his older brother's compositions. His distinctive style comes to the

fore in the fantasia, which in Emanuel's hands became the *free* fantasia, notated largely without bar lines (ex.5).



Ex.5 C. P. E. Bach, Fantasia in F, W. 59/5, opening (original fingerings)

Emanuel's F major Fantasia (Wq.59/5), composed in 1782 and published in 1785, contrasts with both Sebastian's and Friedemann's essays in the genre by ranging constantly between the most diverse types of textures and melodic ideas. Except at the end, which consists of a brief passage notated with figured bass, everything is carefully written out, including numerous dynamic markings; the impression of an improvisation is only an appearance. Performance on the fortepiano is possible; indeed, Emanuel wrote that fantasias can be very effective on the piano when played without dampers.<sup>10</sup> Yet, to judge from the titles of the publications in which pieces of this type appeared, they were intended primarily for the clavichord, and Emanuel went farther than any other family member in cultivating a keyboard idiom distinctive to this instrument.<sup>11</sup>

Today Emanuel is most famous for the type of keyboard piece represented by his F major Fantasia. Yet at Berlin he also developed a grander type of keyboard writing that can be called 'symphonic'. Sebastian wrote many keyboard pieces in imitation of orchestral music, among them the Italian Concerto for double-manual harpsichord. But by 1750 the prevailing style of orchestral writing had changed substantially. Orchestras had grown bigger, yet instead of giving them dense counterpoint, composers of orchestral music were inventing new types of textures that were often limited to two or three real parts. A leading melodic line might, however, be joined to some distinctive type of accompaniment based on a recurring motive. Music of this type would become a speciality of Johann Christian Bach, who must have learned the rudiments of the style during five years in Berlin, where he lived and studied with Emanuel after their father's death in 1750.

Emanuel himself had composed only a few symphonies before Christian left Berlin for Italy (and later England) in 1755. But Emanuel was already imitating the orchestral or symphonic music of other composers in keyboard sonatas composed by the early 1750s. Among his sonatas of this type is an E major work from 1754 (Wq.65/28); a manuscript copy of this piece by Christian Bach must

have been made within a few months of its composition.<sup>12</sup> A sonata from the following year, Wq.65/29 in E, is even more symphonic in style (ex.6). Although eminently suitable to either harpsichord or fortepiano, it is likely that Emanuel anticipated performances of this sonata on the clavichord, an instrument on which Burney found him proficient in 'every style', even though he 'confines himself chiefly to the expressive'.<sup>13</sup>

Ex.6 C. P. E. Bach, Sonata in E, Wq.65/29, first movement, b.1–10

Can it be a coincidence that about ten years later Christian Bach published a sonata in the same style and key? The first movement incorporates adaptations of orchestral texture reminiscent of Emanuel's two sonatas from the 1750s. The final movement of Christian's sonata is in rondo form, which Sebastian hardly used; Emanuel, however, began including rondo movements in his sonatas of the 1750s, including the one in E major. Christian Bach would use rondo form in dozens of instrumental works. His music is so different from that of other family members that it can be hard to understand him as belonging to the same tradition as Sebastian or Emanuel. Forkel went so far as to deny to Christian the 'original genius of the Bach family'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Christian's refusal to follow the path of older family members was, paradoxically, in keeping with family tradition; it must have been encouraged by Sebastian himself, if not also Emanuel. The actual sound of Christian's keyboard and instrumental music is remote from that of their father. Yet, during eight years in Italy, Christian wrote many sacred vocal works in which the frequent use of archaic counterpoint must have been inspired, in part, by some of Sebastian's late compositions.

Indeed, Christian was the only Bach son to incorporate a fugue into one of his keyboard sonatas.<sup>15</sup> In other works, however, Christian's counterpoint is one of texture or colour rather than of voice leading in the traditional sense. Sebastian had been a master of every aspect of music: not only counterpoint and harmony, but instrumental sonority. His older sons exercised little creativity with respect to instrumental colour, but the latter is vitally important in Christian's orchestral music. His keyboard works are also colourful, especially in their use of new types of idiomatic figuration and new accompaniment textures, notably the so-called 'Alberti bass'.<sup>16</sup>

Today the Alberti bass is often regarded as an unimaginative formula; it does not help that pianists often apply the damper pedal to it, reducing it to a vapid sheen of harmony. Far from automatically implying legato or use of the damper pedal, however, Alberti basses were originally an imitation of instrumental textures. Often they benefit from performance in a detached manner, evoking the 'off-the-string' sound that one might expect of identical figuration in the middle part of the work illustrated in ex.7.<sup>17</sup> Christian Bach's imaginative use of Alberti basses in his keyboard music was just one element in a constantly changing approach to texture; in his E major sonata, the Alberti bass occurs in a single bar of the closing theme, appearing in the left hand as part of a longer passage in orchestral or symphonic style (ex.8).

Ex.7 J. C. Bach, Trio in D for two violins and cello, Warburton 36, first movement, b.1–3

Ex.8 J. C. Bach, Sonata in E, Op.5/5, first movement, b.27–29

The E major sonata by J. C. Bach was the fifth in a set of sixth issued 'for the Piano Forte or Harpsichord'.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the first four pieces in the set, it is entirely devoid of dynamic markings and perfectly idiomatic to either instrument. By the same token, most of Emanuel's keyboard music through this period remains entirely practical for performance on the harpsichord – despite his having acquired his famous Silbermann clavichord about 1746 and a piano (with extended keyboard compass) some twenty years after that.<sup>19</sup> Some dynamic markings must be disregarded,<sup>20</sup> but the musical structure and, more importantly, the expression even of such extraordinary works as the sonatas Wq.65/16–17 and the concertos Wq.23 and 31 can be fully conveyed to an audience by a good harpsichordist—although approaches to articulation and other elements of performance appropriate to earlier music may require adaptation.

To the end of their careers, both composers must have been well aware that many purchasers of their published keyboard music still owned and may have preferred harpsichords. As late as the 1780s, the latter may have remained the most common instruments available for

public performances, if not also for private household concerts. Even Christian may not have begun to develop (or compose for) a distinctive playing technique specific to the piano until after his arrival in London in 1762.

Today the late harpsichords of Broadwood, Schudi and other makers, even if no longer derided as failed efforts to compete with the fortepiano, remain little known - rarely copied by modern builders and hardly ever heard in recordings or performances. The pianos, moreover, that members of the Bach family would have known at Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg, Milan and London differed considerably from the late (post-Mozart) Viennese types that have become the most common in present-

day performances of 18th-century music. How the use of more historically appropriate instruments might influence our views of the music discussed here is beyond the scope of this introductory survey - but that it might do so profoundly can hardly be doubted.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Johann Nicolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben* (Leipzig, 1802), 44. A complete translation is included in Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds), rev Christoph Wolff, *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York, 1998), 458.
- 2 The fantasia is a ritornello form whose first twelve bars alternate with three episodes, practically unchanged save for key. The fugue introduces two contrasting subjects in succession, then combines them. In the absence of any sources from before the mid-1720s, my date is admittedly a guess, earlier than those previously suggested; see David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (New York, 2/2006), 143.
- 3 None of the *pedalier* organ pieces that have been published under the name of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach have a secure attribution to him; see David Schulenberg, *The Music of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (Rochester, 2010), 66–67, 117–18.
- 4 According to one manuscript copy, the fantasia was *fatto Octobr: 1770* ('made in October 1770', Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P329, f. 6v).
- 5 The passage shown in ex.4 also occurs earlier within the fantasia, in an easier-to-play version. Perhaps Friedemann adapted the first appearance of the passage for *manualiter* performance but at its recapitulation merely indicated a repeat of the same music for his copyist, who reverted to an otherwise lost early version with a pedal part. In ex.4 the original distribution of notes between the staves has been revised to clarify the suggested division of the passage between the hands.
- 6 Sebastian may have created the set of six organ sonatas for Friedemann, who had a hand in copying one of their earliest sources; see the detailed discussion by Pieter Dirksen in the introduction to his edition, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Sämtliche Orgelwerk*, vol. 5 (Wiesbaden, 2010), 18–23.
- 7 The manuscript copy Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P328 identifies the two lengthy fantasias in C minor, F15 and 16, as being for solo clavichord (*per il Clavicordio solo*).
- 8 Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1753–62); ed. Tobias Plebuch in *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works*, vols. 7/1–3 (Los Altos, 2011); trans. William J. Mitchell as *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (New York, 1949). References to this work here are by volume, chapter, and paragraph; cited here is introduction to vol. 1, para. 11.
- 9 For example, by Forkel (1802), 17, trans. in David and Mendel (1998), 436. This contention was already disputed by the original editors of *The Bach Reader* (New York, 1945), 311, n.18.
- 10 Bach (1753–62), vol. 2, ch. 41, para. 4. The reference to *das ungedämpfte Register des Fortepiano* presumably meant lifting all the dampers for the duration of a movement, as apparently envisioned by Beethoven in the first movement of his *Sonata quasi una fantasia*, Op. 27/2.
- 11 For a more detailed examination of the evolving idiom of Emanuel's keyboard music, see David Schulenberg, 'C. P. E. Bach's Keyboard Music and the Question of Idiom', in Mary Oleskiewicz (ed), *Bach Perspectives*, vol. 11 (Urbana, 2017), 83–112.
- 12 Christian's manuscript, which remained in his brother's possession as a so-called 'house copy', is in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P776 (available online at <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de>).
- 13 Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, The Netherlands, and United Provinces*, 2 vols. (London, 2/1775), vol. 2, 271.
- 14 Bachischer Originalgeist
- 15 Forkel (1802), 44 (translated as 'the original spirit of Bach' in David and Mendel (1998), 458).
- 16 In the C minor sonata published at London as the concluding work of the composer's Op.5 (see below). The view that the sonata dates back to his years in Italy is plausible but is not founded on any documentary evidence.
- 17 This type of accompaniment, based on broken chords, is particularly common in the music of Domenico Alberti (c.1710–46), which Christian is likely to have known through one of the many early printed editions and manuscript copies.
- 18 The 'Alberti'-like second violin part receives light, detached articulation in the rousing performance by The Vivaldi Project on *Discovering the Classical String Trio*, vol. 1 (MSR Classics, MS 1621, 2016).
- 19 Six Sonatas for the Forte Piano or Harpsichord, Op. 5 (London, c.1766).
- 20 An annotation in a manuscript copy of Emanuel's famous 'Rondo on his Separation from his Silbermann Clavichord' (Wq.66) indicates that he acquired the instrument about 1746; see the introduction by Peter Wollny to his edition in *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works*, vol. 1/8.1 (Los Altos, 2006), xvi–xvii. Miklós Spányi, 'Performer's Remarks', liner notes for *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Keyboard Concertos*, vol. 9 (BIS, 1997), 6–7, shows that around 1762–65 Emanuel acquired a new 'piano-like instrument' with compass extending up to F.
- 21 Emanuel provided guidelines for interpreting *p*, *mf*, and the like on a two-manual harpsichord in Bach (1753–62), vol. 1, ch. 3, para. 29 and vol. 2, ch. 29, para. 7 (the latter specifically with regard to accompaniment).