

Elements of Baroque Performance Style Applied to a Popular Piece of J. S. Bach by Phillip Gearing

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Introduction

We in the twenty-first century are in an enviable position: we have more or less equal and unprecedented access to and are able to enjoy a wide variety of musical styles and genres from the earliest stages of civilization to the present day, from all regions of the globe, from many nationalities and cultures. Until the late eighteenth century, only the latest music was heard, composed for use for a specific occasion and seldom aired again. The rediscovery and subsequent promotion of the music of J. S. Bach by Mendelssohn and others in the early to mid-nineteenth century created a new situation in which the music of the past was heard alongside music of the present; throughout the twentieth century the balance tipped more and more in favour of the music of the past. The late twentieth century witnessed the rise of “authentic” performance practices with original instrument groups. Related scholarship has given rise to debates – sometimes quite heated – about how to interpret and apply the source materials to achieve an “authentic” performance. Some endeavours have been made to inform the younger generation of musicians, such as the editing work of, for example Geoffrey Lancaster for the List C pieces in the AMEB Pianoforte Series 12 books. At the very least, the approach to Baroque and Classical works has been enlivened and enabled to break free of the early twentieth century performance style of these works which we would now consider to be inappropriate – even turgid and uninspiring. “We must approach the great masterpieces by pushing aside the lush growth of traditional experience and interpretation, and once again begin from the beginning”. (Harnoncourt, p. 44)

Nevertheless, confusion persists. I am frequently approached by students and teachers, and have students recommended to me by other teachers, who are uncertain about Baroque practice and are seeking clarification.

In this era of DIY and self-help books, there is an abundance of source material available to the inquisitive teacher or student. This leads to two possible dangers, however: firstly, for some the volumes are too numerous, too large, too detailed, and therefore too daunting; secondly, it is easy to form the opinion that if the “rules” are (mechanically) applied, an “authentic” performance will be the inevitable outcome.

The following axiom, the origins of which I have long since forgotten, provides apposite advice: “Performance is an art, not the application of a database”. So-called “rules” are really only guidelines which codify actual practice, and are therefore not to be rigidly

applied; they guide us to acceptable practice, whether in harmony, melody writing, or performance practice.

This paper seeks to achieve two things: firstly, to provide some general guidelines toward an historically informed performance of the music of J. S. Bach and his contemporaries, with the encouragement that within the guidelines, much room exists for diversity of opinion and a personal approach; and secondly, to provide an example of how the guidelines may be applied to a well known piece of J. S. Bach that is commonly used for teaching purposes.

The Elements of Baroque Style

The concept that playing a musical instrument requires an holistic approach is not new: it is already formally acknowledged by C. P. E. Bach¹ (p. 30) when he writes: “the true art of playing keyboard instruments depends on three factors so closely related that no one of them can, nor indeed dare, exist without the others. They are: correct fingering, good embellishments, and good performance.” We recognize these as both technical and musical elements, and it is unlikely anyone would disagree that “Lack of these elements or inept use of them makes a poor performance”. (Bach, p. 147)

Fingering

The utmost importance of good fingering is commonly recognized. C. P. E. Bach (1753, p. 41) opines that “[m]ore is lost through poor fingering than can be replaced by all conceivable artistry and good taste”. Clementi (although writing fifty years later when the approach to fingering, as with the keyboard instruments that were being played, had undergone some changes) states, “To produce the best effect, by the easiest means, is the great basis of the art of fingering. The effect, being of the highest importance, is first consulted; the way to accomplish it is then devised; and that mode of fingering is preferred which gives the best effect . . .”. (p. 14)

Bach (p. 42) relates how his “deceased father” (i. e., J. S. Bach) had heard great men who employed their thumbs only when large stretches made it necessary, but because he lived in a time of rapid musical change, he devised a more comprehensive fingering system, especially to increase the role of the thumb and use the fingers “as nature intended”. It would appear that “early” fingering accepts that fingers are not and do not perform uniformly. There was a concept from the sixteenth century of “good” and “bad” fingers (Ferguson, p. 67). In the mid-eighteenth century it was acknowledged that “the keyboardist cannot always expect the degree of clarity from a weaker finger that a stronger finger achieves quite readily, for clarity is principally won through uniform pressure”. (Bach, p. 69) Nevertheless, the importance of a natural hand position and relaxed muscles was

¹ To avoid unnecessary repetition, C. P. E. Bach is referred to hereafter as “Bach”, whereas his father is referred to as “J. S. Bach”.

recognized. Bach warns (p. 69) that if proper attention is not devoted to fingering, the player's hands "must be continually twisted and distorted . . . the remaining fingers lose their natural position and must be forced into use. There is, consequently, no chance to loosen or relax the muscles, and the fingers stiffen."

Example 1 illustrates the use of "good" and "bad" fingers, as found in Ferguson (p. 69). It will be observed that a longer finger is sometimes required to vault over a shorter finger (e.g. 3rd over 4th).

Example 1: Early fingerings of diatonic scale passages ("good" fingers in bold type)

	L.H. ascending	L.H. descending	R.H. ascending	R.H. descending
Buchner, c. 1520		2 3 2 3 2 3 2	2 3 2 3 2 3 4	4 3 2 3 2 3 2
Ammerbach, 1571	4 3 2 1 4 3 2	2 3 2 3 2 3 4	2 3 2 3 2 3 4	4 3 2 3 2 3 2
Diruta, 1593	4 3 2 3 2 3 2	2 3 2 3 2 3 4	2 3 4 3 4 3 4	4 3 2 3 2 3 2
Cabezón, 1578	4 3 2 1	1 2 3 4	3 4 3 4	3 2 3 2
English Virginalists	5 4 3 2 1 2 1	1 2 3 4 3 4 5	3 4 3 4 3 4 5	5 4 3 2 3 2 3
Sweelinck	5 4 3 2 1 2 5 4 3 2 [3 2] 1	1 2 3 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 5	2 3 4 3 4 5	{ 4 3 2 1 2 3 2 5 4 3 2 3 2 3
Scheidemann	{ ² 1 ² } 4 3 2 } [1] 2		3 4 3 4 3 4 5	5 4 3 2 3 2
Purcell, 1696	5 4 3 2 3 2 1	1 2 3 4 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 3 4 5	5 4 3 2 3 2 1
J. S. Bach, 1720	[5 4] 3 2 1 2 1	[1 2 1] 2 3 4 5	3 4 3 4 3 4 5	5 4 3 2 3 2 1
Nivers, 1665	4 3 2 1 2 1	{ 1 2 3 4 3 4 1 2 3 4 3 4 5	{ 2 3 4 3 4 3 4 1 2 3 4 3 4	{ 4 3 2 3 2 1 4 3 2 3 2 3 2
F. Couperin, 1716	5 4 3 2 [3 2] 1	{ 1 2 3 4 3 4 1 2 3 4 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 { ³ 4 ₂ 3	5 4 3 2 3 2 1 5 4 3 2 3 2

Bach lays down some principles of fingering:

- the black keys belong essentially to the three longest fingers, and so black keys are seldom taken by the little finger and only out of necessity by the thumb (p. 45)
- the thumb and the little finger do not play black notes, except when a contextual leap makes it necessary (p. 60)

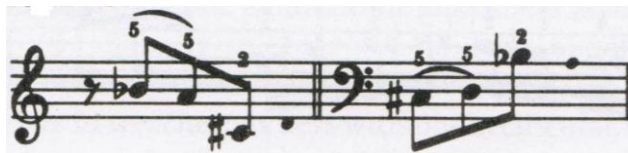
Muzio Clementi was one of the earliest composers to conceive keyboard compositions completely in terms of the pianoforte. The English piano of his time, from which the modern grand piano evolved, had a heavier touch (caused by a deeper key fall) and relatively thick strings which promoted a sonorous tone. This allowed Clementi to develop a broad, expressive style of performance, dependant, in large measure, on legato technique. It is clear from his treatise (pp. 9, 15 and 17, for example) that Clementi attached much

Example 4b: Successive 3rds played repeated fingers



Nevertheless, Bach does allow for finger substitution in some cases, although “students should not be permitted to employ [it] except as a last resort or to avoid an even greater difficulty”. (p. 72) He also permits, on occasion, the gliding of a finger from a black key to an adjacent white key as shown in Ex 5 (p. 73):

Example 5: 5th finger slurred



Thus we begin to see that earlier fingerings promote a more detached style of playing. This is closely related to the treatment of articulation.

Articulation

Paul Badura-Skoda (1993, p. 92) identifies non-existent or incorrect articulation as the most serious and common fault in modern performances of Bach. The importance of articulation in spoken language is easily illustrated by presenting the same written information with and without punctuation to produce two entirely different meanings:

King Charles walked and talked ten hours after his head was cut off.

King Charles walked and talked. Ten hours after, his head was cut off.

Ferguson (p. 57) cites the characterisation of themes as one of the most important functions of articulation “for it brings out their inherent life and enables the most involved contrapuntal textures to remain transparent . . . [and] define[s] the smaller units out of which passagework is built”.

The modern basis for articulation is different from that of earlier times, due partially to the different constructions and materials used in making the instruments, as well as the types of buildings and rooms in which music was performed. Several eighteenth century writers, including Mattheson (Hamburg, 1735), C. P. E. Bach (Berlin, 1753), Marpurg (Berlin, 1765), and Türk (Leipzig, 1789), describe an articulation that is neither “legato” in the modern sense, nor clearly detached, but which they represent as the normal type of articulation. This is partly interpreted by Schulenberg (p. 15) as “the placement of miniscule articulations



In his performance notes for the List C repertoire for the AMEB Piano Series 12 (e.g., Third Grade, p.32), fortepianist Geoffrey Lancaster writes, “Editorial fingering, which in some cases may appear to be unusual, is calculated to provide the means through which the young keyboard player may experience the wide variety of representative articulations needed to best meet the interpretative demands. . .”. Later, he advises that the degree of detachment is flexible and depends, in part, on personal taste in response to musical context. Performers are encouraged to experiment with “the widest possible variety of articulation”.

This contrasts with Clementi, who recommends (p. 9): “When the composer leaves the LEGATO, and STACCATO to the performer’s taste; the best rule is, to adhere chiefly to the LEGATO reserving the STACCATO to give SPIRIT occasionally to certain passages, and to set off the HIGHER BEAUTIES of the LEGATO”.

Tempo

Tempo is closely related to articulation in that it governs the character of the performance quite strongly. Analysis of organ barrels of the late eighteenth century suggests that Baroque tempi were, in general, quicker than those of today, although Ferguson (p. 59) cautions that, in order to make [the] subtleties of articulation clear, it is frequently necessary to play quickly-moving early music at a noticeably slower tempo than would be natural to passagework of the nineteenth century. “The notes must be allowed time to breathe and establish their individuality, as it were, and never be herded into anonymous groups.”

Dance movements, such as the Allemande, Courante, etc, have their associated tempi. For non-dance pieces the correct tempo (or tempo *range*) can be deduced from the time signature, rhythmic patterns used, the choice and disposition of note values, and titles. Some words which we accept today as indication of speed are in reality indications of character, e.g. *vivace*, *largo*, etc.

Dynamics

We associate the term *terrace dynamics* with the Baroque. This term was coined only in the late nineteenth century, and implies a certain rigidity. In fact, the Baroque probably had a far greater use of dynamics than we normally suppose.

It is true that terrace dynamics result, for example, in a Concerto Grosso by the alternation of the ripieno and concertino groupings; and it is also true that echo effects were popular; but it is also true that the piano was invented in 1709 as an attempt to overcome what was perceived as an inadequacy of the harpsichord in terms of dynamics. Bach notes that the fortepiano enjoyed greater advantages over the harpsichord and organ because of the many ways in which its volume can be gradually changed. Allowing the dynamic shapes to follow the natural rise and fall of the phrase shapes results in a much more vital, poised performance.

Ornamentation

Ornaments are only shorthand to save the writing out of many notes. Embellishment is an integral part of Baroque performance, often left to the good taste of the performer, although some composers, such as Couperin (and the French in general) were quite strict about ornamentation in their own music. Bach counsels against overuse (p. 81): “avoid a prodigal use of embellishments . . . Regard them as spices which may ruin the best dish, or gewgaws which may deface the most perfect building”. In other words, they must form an integral part of the musical fabric, and must not destroy the sense of musical line. They must also reflect the character of *Affekt* of the piece. The repercussions of a trill in a *cantabile*, for example, would be slower and less numerous than those in a *Presto*.

The *Explication* in J. S. Bach’s *Klavierbüchlein* of 1720 for his ten-year-old son Wilhelm Friedemann (see Example 8), is generally taken as a basis for understanding ornamentation. It is not complete, and it does not place the ornaments in a musical context, but it is nonetheless a most valuable guide.

In general, one should start an ornament on the beat, and employ accidentals that conform to the key of the immediate context.

Example 8: The Explication (Emery, p. 13)

Application to Bach's Menuet in G

The following description refers to Examples 9 and 10. Example 9 has the plain score marked with my edited articulations; Example 10 is an embellished version. The intention for performance is for each section to be played twice, once plainly and then once embellished, thus:

A (simple) | A (embellished) | B (simple) | B (embellished).

Part A

The first 16 bars are structured in two eight-bar sections; each eight-bar section is further divided into four-bar groupings. Like much music of this period, the first eight bars is made up of two shorter phrases (bars 1-2 and 3-4) followed by a third, longer phrase (bars 4-8). Bars 9-16 are similarly structured.

The articulation within these phrases, and which will bring the phrases to life, is considered separately. In bar 1, the crotchet will be played *tenuto* to clearly project the first beat. Although the first note is marked *tenuto* it will be released slightly short to create the *silence d'articulation* and thus gently articulate the second beat. There are several choices for articulating the four quavers, the best two being to slur all four together, or to slur them in pairs. I selected the latter as being more lively and therefore, to my mind, giving a stronger dance quality. In the left hand, rolling the chord on the first beat gives a pleasing rhythmic impetus which is not as strong if the chord is played straight. The crotchet A is separately articulated by releasing the left hand chord at the same time as the second quaver of the right hand is released.

In bar 2, in order to project the triple metre, the first beat will be played the longest, with the following crotchets becoming progressively shorter; in this edition, *tenuto*, *mezzo staccato* and *staccato*. Slurring beats 1 and 2, as in some older editions, would be inappropriate because of the Baroque practice of separating large intervals.

The right hand articulation for bars 3 and 4 replicate bars 1 and 2, except that the first beat in bar 4 would be held somewhat shorter than the first note of bar 3, as the octave interval is wider than the 5th, and is therefore treated to a greater detachment. The left hand notes are each gently articulated by releasing at the same time as the final right hand quaver in each bar.

Bars 5, 6 and 7 follow a similar treatment. In bar 8 the right hand note is played *tenuto*, but as in earlier bars, the note is released slightly early in order to articulate the following note, in this case, the first note of bar 9, especially as it is a new bar and a new phrase. The first beat of the left hand is likewise released a little early, to articulate the quaver D. At this part of the bar, the octave and then the minor 7th intervals, being wide, are more detached; the final three quavers, being stepwise, are slurred, which also gives a pleasing sense of movement toward the next phrase. The release of the right hand A will coincide with the release of the final left hand quaver.

The treatment for bars 9-16, being the same musical material, has been repeated. In bar 16, the left hand crotchet, being an octave interval from the minim G, will be separately articulated; a gentle diminuendo will also assist the sense of rounding off the section.

The repeat of bars 1-16, in line with Baroque practice, can be decorated. My editorial embellishments (see Example 10) are only one of any number of possibilities; but it will be observed that they never interfere with the harmonic structure and that the rhythms employed consistently maintain that long-short-short triple metre lilt that has been established from the outset.

In bar 3 the quavers have been replaced by triplets, lending a gentle thrust toward the high crotchet G that is the peak of the phrase. The triplets are slurred in groups of three to maintain the metrical shape. In bar 6 the first-beat B has been introduced by a grace note, written out as a quaver. These two quavers are slurred, the second quaver additionally given a *staccato* dot; the effect of this is to create an hiatus before moving on with the following four quavers which are unembellished.

Bar 7 again decorates the original quavers as triplets. The first triplet is slurred as a group of three, but the second triplet has the first two notes slurred and the third note *staccato*, in order to articulate more strongly the minim B in bar 8, effectively an *appoggiatura* which invites an greater application of weight. The bass in bar 8 has been decorated with a *trillo* on the third beat which called for a change in articulation compared with the unembellished bar 8. The first two quavers could have been slurred, but being a wide interval, it is more appropriate to detach them.

Likewise, a *trillo* has been applied to the third beat in the bass of bar 12, and a *mordent* to the first beat in the treble of bar 13. The treble in bar 14 is treated identically to bar 6, while the articulation adopted in bar 15 has the same reasoning. The *appoggiatura* F# in bar 16 could have been allocated a duration of two beats, like the *appoggiatura* B in bar 8; I have realised it as only a crotchet because the result is a rather attractive alternating rhythmic movement between treble and bass, rather than both voices having the same rhythm. Both hands would be released together at the end of bar 16.

Part B

The B section (bars 17-end), as is common in binary form, offer some points of contrast. In this instance, although use of the rhythmic motive from bar 1 is continued, the tessitura is higher than at the opening, and the contour is generally falling rather than rising. For this reason, rather than maintain the slurred quaver pairs, I have opted to slur the four quavers together, giving a broader

and more expansive character. For the same reason, the six quavers of bar 21 are all slurred together.

In bar 24 the three left hand crotchets are all marked *mezzo staccato*. The reason for the change in articulation from bars 22 and 23 is, once again, the wider intervals employed in the bass; the final crotchet I have decided to treat *mezzo staccato* rather than *staccato* in order to highlight the change of harmonic direction away from D major back to G major that is introduced by the C natural.

Bars 25 and 26 introduce a new figure in the treble, and a fuller texture in the bass, suggesting the possibility of a treatment that highlights the contrast. To accomplish this, the first treble note in each bar is marked *staccato* (rather than *tenuto* as in the foregoing parts of the piece), the sustained bass voice lending weight to the first beat of the bar; nevertheless, care should be taken that the *staccato* is not treated too short. In bar 27 the crotchets are all marked *mezzo staccato* to indicate deliberate weight for each note – the dance lilt should not be forgotten here. The four quavers in bar 28, unusually placed at the beginning rather than at the end of the bar, could be slurred in pairs; but I have chosen to slur them together to continue the more expansive character that has so far been a characteristic of the B section.

Bars 29-32 signal a return to the original articulation style of slurred quaver pairs to provide a sense of balance to round off the piece.

At this point, three-quarters of the way through the piece, a novel device would not be unwelcome. Accordingly, I have embellished not the pitch, but the rhythm in bars 17 and 18. The dotted rhythms employed here generate a quirky character, particularly if a double-dotted treatment is adopted – something which is not required, but which would be in keeping with Baroque style. In bar 20 there is a return to the *appoggiatura* mode of decoration. To continue the quirkiness, rather than slur together the six quavers of bar 21, or slur them in pairs, I have slurred them in groups of three; this gives an interesting off-beat accent (to which I acknowledge some might object) midway through the bar, and sets up groupings of three which are continued by the triplet embellishments of bar 22. The *appoggiatura* E in bar 24 is prepared by the quaver decoration of the previous bar, whose articulation is reasoned similarly to that for the embellished versions of bars 7-8 and bars 15-16. Bar 24 is also treated to an embellishment in the bass voice by filling out the minor 7th interval as a dominant 7th quaver arpeggio, which naturally suggests being grouped under one slur.

The last two quavers of bar 29 have been filled out to become four semiquavers; the distinct change of rhythm is marked by the four quavers slurred separately from the four semiquavers. The decoration which commences bar 31 gives a last quirky flourish, and the *appoggiatura* A in bar 32 receives an identical treatment to the early examples.

Dynamics have not been marked, but a *mezzo forte* is suggested as the general dynamic level, with a gentle rise and fall to shape the phrases. The contrasts exhibited in bars 17-24 suggest a change in dynamic; a *forte* would be appropriate to the expansive interpretation adopted here. Similarly, a contrast is required for bars 25-26, for which a *piano* dynamic is suggested, increasing to finish *mezzo forte*.

Example 9

J. S. Bach, *Menuet* (editorial articulations by Phillip Gearing)

Menuet

J. S. Bach

7

14

21

28

Example 10

J. S. Bach, *Menuet* (editorial embellishments and articulations by Phillip Gearing)

Menuet

J. S. Bach

The musical score for the Minuet by J.S. Bach is presented in five systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical ornaments and editorial markings. Measure numbers 7, 14, 21, and 27 are indicated at the start of their respective systems. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the fifth system.

Conclusion

In the spirit of this paper, listeners are encouraged to experiment with their own articulations, embellishments, and dynamic plans, but remembering that the ear is the best judge.

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