

New Perspectives on the Canons of Johann Sebastian Bach

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My research aims to improve our understanding of Bach's canons and their position and significance in the Baroque era by examining their wider historical and musical context. To date, my enquiries have primarily centred on the *Fourteen Canons* (BWV 1087) and the *Musical Offering* (BWV 1079). I shall briefly outline two hypotheses regarding the origin and content of these works; these new perspectives will be discussed in detail in two forthcoming articles.¹

Although the *Fourteen Canons* are symptomatic of Bach's evident preoccupation with the genre of canon in the final decade of his life, the work's theoretical disposition, essentially encyclopædic survey of canonic techniques and organisation according to a principle of increasing contrapuntal complexity are markedly distinctive features. It seems plausible to suggest that an external source may have acted as a model and stimulus for the composition of the *Fourteen Canons*, such as the hitherto unconsidered *Practischer Beweis*, a canonic treatise by Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel published in 1725.²

There are a number of striking correspondences. First, Stölzel and Bach are similarly concerned with demonstrating a range of contrapuntal techniques on a single subject in the form of the perpetual canon. Indeed, both include canons in similar motion, contrary motion, retrograde and retrograde inversion; a seemingly general correlation that is actually quite significant, considering that Bach does not collectively use all of these contrapuntal techniques in any of his other late canonic works. Secondly, Bach principally concentrates his efforts on contrary motion canons, which were the second type listed in *Practischer Beweis*. By contrast, Stölzel focused on the first type listed, similar motion canons, and delegated responsibility for exploring the possibilities of the other main types of canon to the reader. It seems that Bach accepted this challenge. Equally fascinating is Stölzel's conservative view regarding the intervals of pitch at which strict imitation could successfully occur: canons other than those at the

¹ The articles are entitled 'A New Source for the *Fourteen Canons*' and 'The Genesis of the *Musical Offering*: Redefining the Context'.

² Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel, *Practischer Beweis* (n.p.: the author, 1725). Its complete title is as follows: *Practischer Beweis, wie aus einem nach dem wahren Fundamente solcher Noten-Künsteleyen gesetzten Canone perpetuo in hypo dia pente quatuor vocum, viel und mancherley, Theils an Melodie, Theils auch nur an Harmonie, unterschiedene Canones perpetui à 4 zu machen seyn.*

unison, fourth, fifth and octave could only occur 'with difficulty and oftentimes not at all'.³ Bach, however, outdid his contemporary's endeavours and not only included canons at the unison, fourth and fifth but also demonstrated that it was possible to construct canons at the intervals of second, third and seventh.⁴ The cautiousness of Stölzel's approach may well have encouraged Bach to demonstrate his own skill in this particular aspect of canonic composition. Finally, it is revealing to note that *Practischer Beweis* contains a number of remarkably similar indications to the label '&c.' which occurs at the end of the *Fourteen Canons*.

I am still trying to ascertain how Bach could have come into contact with Stölzel's treatise. Preliminary investigations indicate three distinct possibilities: the Leipzig trade fairs, the Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences and Johann Gottfried Walther. I initially discounted Stölzel and Bach's common membership of the Society as an unlikely possibility, but a recent reassessment now leads me to conclude that this should be given further consideration. Although merely speculative at this stage, the hypothesis that Walther could have passed information regarding Stölzel's treatise, or even a copy of it, on to his cousin is particularly exciting. This theory is suggested by the fact that Walther was interested in strict counterpoint and corresponded extensively on the subject with Heinrich Bokemeyer, who was to some degree 'responsible' for the existence of *Practischer Beweis*.⁵

³ Das Wort Canon heißt eine Richtschnur, und es werden dergleichen Compositiones also genennet, weil darinnen die Vox consequens ihrem Canoni so genau folgen muß, daß sie auch durch kein hemitonium über solche Schnur hauen darff. Denn widrigen falls höret eine solche Composition (wenn man es stricte nehmen will,) auf ein Canon zu seyn. Und dahero ist es gewiß, daß in diesem Punkte die Canones in Unisono und Octava die accuratesten seyn, welchen immediate die in quarta u. quinta an Accuratesse folgen. Bey denen übrigen Intervallis aber, nemlich der secunde, tertie, sexte und septime kan schwerlich und mehrentheils gar nicht, solche canonische Richtigkeit statt haben. Wie solches die Erfahrung bezeuget. Stölzel, *Practischer Beweis*, paragraph 28.

⁴ Another example of Bach's innate skill in developing the compositional ideas of his predecessors and contemporaries to new levels of erudition and complexity is the series of interval canons in the *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988). Yo Tomita has convincingly suggested that a manuscript belonging to Jan Dismas Zelenka, which contains a set of eleven interval canons by Johann Joseph Fux followed by nine of Zelenka's own, may have provided the model for Bach's work. Yo Tomita, 'Bach and Dresden: A New Hypothesis on the Origin of the *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988)', in *Music and Theology: Essays in Honor of Robin A. Leaver*, ed. Daniel Zager (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007) pp. 169–92. Bach not only constructs a series that uses an organisational principle similar to that of their 'fairly straightforward compositional exercises' (Tomita, p. 177) but also generates a structural framework for the composition through the placement of an interval canon on every third variation.

⁵ At the beginning of his treatise, Stölzel acknowledges that it was prompted by a recent disagreement with someone who believed that strict counterpoint was the apex of musical composition: 'Es ist nicht gar lange, daß ich mich gegen einem der das Non plus ultra der musicalischen Composition in den Canonibus suchte, verlauten ließ'. He states that *Practischer Beweis* was 'zuvörderst dem, der es nicht begreifen können, und sodann zum Behuff der Wahrheit, einigen Music-Freunden'. Stölzel, *Practischer Beweis*, paragraphs 1–2. It is extremely likely that the person in question was Bokemeyer – the Wolfenbüttel Cantor had just been involved in staunchly defending the merits of canon in a high profile debate

It will also be necessary to examine the wider context of the treatise, focusing specifically on the immediate background to its production in terms of 'Die canonische Anatomie', its broad position in relation to other theoretical works on canon, and its reception in the eighteenth century as a whole. I intend to produce an edition and critical commentary of *Practischer Beweis*, partly because it provides significant insights into the *Fourteen Canons* and partly because it has largely been neglected by scholars interested in Stölzel and by those primarily concerned with strict counterpoint.

My other hypothesis is that Bach's inclusion of canons within the *Musical Offering* was motivated by his membership of the Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences. While the work's connection to the Society has been noted by several scholars,⁶ the practical implications with regard to the genesis and design of the composition have not been clarified. I believe that Bach quickly recognised that the *Musical Offering* could serve a dual purpose: as well as fulfilling his promise to Frederick the Great, as expressed in the dedication 'to work out this right Royal theme more fully, and then make it known to the world',⁷ it could be submitted to the Society in 1748, thereby fulfilling his membership requirements for that year.

The chronological and musical evidence is substantial: the genesis of the *Musical Offering* broadly coincided with Bach's admission to the Society and the canons aligned the content of the work with his submissions for 1747, namely the *Triple Canon* (BWV 1076) and the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch* (BWV 769). Even more compelling however, is Mizler's glowing account in *Neu eröffnete musikalische Bibliothek* of the activities of the Prussian king during his visit to Dresden in December 1745.⁸ Viewed from the perspective of Mizler's expressed admiration, it becomes apparent that the *Musical Offering* was especially suitable for the Society because Bach could emphasise that he had met Frederick the Great, that he had had the honour of performing for him and that he had composed a work based on the subject given to him by the king.

The sincerity of Mizler's published sentiments regarding Frederick the Great can be ascertained by looking for similar opinions in his private correspondence and assessing the extent to which the positive tone of his article was due to the fact that it was written for the public domain. I also plan to investigate whether Bach's contemporaries in general and other members of the Society in particular held the Prussian king in high esteem.

with Johann Mattheson. The dispute, which ended with Bokemeyer accepting defeat, was published in *Critica Musica* in 1723–1724 as 'Die canonische Anatomie'.

⁶ See for example Hans Günter Hoke, 'Neue Studien zur Kunst der Fuge, BWV 1080', in *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft*, vol. 17/2–3 (1975) pp. 95–115 and Ursula Kirkendale, 'The Source for Bach's *Musical Offering*: The *Institutio oratoria* of Quintilian', in *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 33/1 (1980) pp. 88–141.

⁷ Reproduced in *Bach-Dokumente*, vol. I, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969) no. 173, pp. 241–2. The English translation is taken from *The New Bach Reader*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, rev. Christoph Wolff (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998) no. 245, pp. 226, 228.

⁸ Lorenz Christoph Mizler, *Neu eröffnete musikalische Bibliothek* (Leipzig, 1739–1754) vol. III/2, pp. 367–9.