

J. S. Bach and the Concept of Variety

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His [Bach's] melodies were strange, but always varied, rich in invention, and resembling those of no other composer.¹

The focus of my research is the concept of variety in J. S. Bach's instrumental music. I examine it both as an aesthetic principle reflected in the writings of Bach's contemporaries, and as the reason that Bach's music has outlived different aesthetic frameworks throughout history. Compositional and expressive variety is important because it allows Bach's music to be adapted and reinterpreted in many different ways. In my opinion it acts as a bridge between Bach's compositional thought and the aesthetic needs and expectations of a contemporary audience. In my research, I have concentrated on characteristics of performance practice and aesthetic conventions of Bach's time. More specifically, I examine the role of articulation as a means to expressive and meaningful performance. My aim is to explain the apparent inconsistencies in articulation marks in many manuscript scores of the time, with a specific focus on Bach's instrumental music.

Bach's music is among the most studied areas in the relatively young discipline of musicology, and the results emerging from the multitude of research are frequently contradictory. Although much of this research aims to find firm evidence of various theoretical, aesthetic or interpretational models of Bach's music, contrary to expectations, none has yet succeeded.² Does this mean that our expectations of finding fixed models of meaning (compositional or interpretational) in Bach's music are mistaken? Perhaps his compositional thought is based on a completely different understanding, which, rather than trying to convey any single meaning, views the art of composition as a process of

¹ Bach's obituary, written by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola; see *NBR*/306, p. 305.

² Many research approaches to date have aimed to ground Bach's compositional thought on a firm set of aesthetic conventions, viewing both his vocal and instrumental genres as sharing the same stylistic or compositional features. The exemplary study of Laurence Dreyfus in *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996) argues that Bach's compositional thought is much more complex, viewing Bach's music as an amalgam of different aesthetic models, as a mechanism in continuous flux, combining and interpreting musical ideas. I believe this critical position opens up new alternatives to understanding Bach.

constant flux, of thinking creatively without stopping to explore and interpret ideas. Such an understanding does not see Bach's music as having one fixed meaning but allows it to be valued according to different artistic interpretations and aesthetic needs.

The compositional and expressive versatility of Bach's music means it can be continuously reinterpreted and adapted to different aesthetic tastes and practices. Consequently, Bach's music is still meaningful to audiences today, whose backgrounds and expectations are totally different to those of his time.³ C. P. E. Bach described his father's compositional style as 'always varied and rich in invention'. It is precisely this inventive creativity that makes Bach's music so appealing to different audiences, and gives an important reason for the variety of analytical approaches it has attracted. It also partially explains the impossibility of finding a unified theoretical basis to explain its ingenious versatility.

Articulation is the decisive audible parameter which musicians use to interpret music and determine the emphasis of a particular note, phrase or motif. The treatment of articulation marks in Bach's manuscripts is notorious for its irregularity and inconsistency.⁴ Rather than providing fixed performance instructions, Bach left his manuscripts either unmarked, thus inviting performers' personal interpretations, or with a great deal of (unstandardised) variation in performance marks (ornaments and articulation) hinting at many expressive possibilities. The subsequent tendency of editors to regularise and smooth this expressive richness, which can be observed in some of Bach's own copyists and has continued over the years, resulting in numerous modern printed editions, is most perplexing.⁵ Such editorial interventions imply that these instances of expressive asymmetries occurred as a result of accidental errors of haste and thus had to be 'corrected'.⁶ Most of the studies of articulation markings in Bach's music to date have an empirical foundation and reflect the difficulty of reaching any firm conclusions about the systematic application of articulation marks.⁷ I believe that the relevance of such asymmetries in articulation becomes clearer

³ John Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ John Butt, *Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ Arthur Mendel, 'Recent Developments in Bach Scholarship', *Musical Quarterly*, 46/3 (1960), 283–300.

⁶ James Webster, 'The Triumph of Variability: Haydn's Articulation Markings in the Autograph of Sonata no. 49 in E flat', in Sieghard Brandenburg (ed.), *Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven: Studies in the Music of the Classical Period: Essays in Honour of Alan Tyson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 33–64.

⁷ The research attempts to study principles of articulation in Bach's instrumental music divide into two extremes – either supporting the high level of inconsistency as intentional (see Dene Barnett, 'Non-uniform Slurring in 18th Century Music: Accident or Design?', *Haydn Yearbook*, 10 (1978), 179–99) or accepting the model of consistency as a guiding principle (see William Newman, 'Is there a rationale for the articulation of J. S. Bach's strings and wind music?', in J. W. Pruett (ed.), *Studies in Musicology: Essays in History, Style, and Bibliography of Music in Memory of Glen Haydon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 229–44). The most extensive bibliographic discussion of the issue can be found in Butt, *Bach Interpretation*.

when examined in the context of aesthetic thought as described by writers of the time. The kernel of their understanding is that variety was a means both to entertain the audience and to demonstrate interpretational mastery of the music.

Rather than searching for articulation standards, I have directed my efforts into studying the aesthetic conventions of the first half of the eighteenth century. A large part of my research consists of examining published accounts of music from the first decades of the century and includes extensive study of the theoretical writings of some of the most prolific music writers and critics in Germany at the time, such as Johann Mattheson, Johann Adolf Scheibe and Lorenz Mizler. I have found that the concept of variety in both expression and interpretation was crucial to these writers. Ideas such as ‘contrasting diversity’ (*Abwechslung*), ‘expectation-play’ with the audience and ‘astonishment’ (*Verwunderung*), as remarked by Mattheson and Scheibe, played an essential role in what they saw as music’s ultimate goal or *der Zweck* (purpose).

Therefore I believe that the asymmetries of articulation in many of the manuscript scores of the time, such as irregular slurs or melodic ideas articulated differently when they are repeated, must have had an important function in the performance of a musical piece. Apart from being technical instructions for the performers, they surely also suggest musical expression. They can be closely linked to principles of rhetorical traditions, which were ubiquitous at the time. Associations between rhetoric and music are the prime theme of nearly all contemporaneous historical accounts. The general understanding of rhetorical processes today associates them with music as a structure-generating tool or as a surface device responsible for decorative figurations. The art of rhetoric, however, had a much deeper intellectual and philosophical function—to stimulate interpretative and creative thinking and to persuade. The central principles of the art were initially founded on the idea of repetition and its variations, outlining and stimulating processes of inventive creativity rather than functioning simply as a form-generating compositional device. One of the most influential rhetorical writings from the sixteenth century onwards is the work of the professor of rhetoric Erasmus of Rotterdam, *De Copia* (1512). Erasmus described mastery of the creative potential of variations and extemporisation as critical for mastering the art of rhetoric:⁸

Exercise in expressing oneself in different ways will be of considerable importance in general for the acquisition of style ... Variety is so powerful in every sphere that there is absolutely nothing, however brilliant, which is not dimmed if not commended by variety ... [Boredom] can easily be avoided by someone who has it at his fingertips to turn one idea into more shapes than Proteus himself is supposed to have turned into.⁹

⁸ Bettina Varwig gives a detailed account of the influence and the transmission of Erasmus’s ideas up to the eighteenth century in her article ‘One More Time: J. S. Bach and Seventeenth-Century Traditions of Rhetoric’, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 5/2 (2008), 179–208.

⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style: De duplici copia verborum ac rerum Commentarii duo*. trans. and ed. Betty I. Knott, in Craig R. Thompson (ed.), *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings*, 2/24 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 302.

Instead of concentrating on the five-fold principles as a structure-generating device, Erasmus emphasised the importance of mastering the 'abundant' style, which can be explained as the same idea expressed in many different ways with a variety of nuanced connotations. Speakers who have mastered the art of rhetoric should, in addition to expressing different nuances, be able to adapt a speech to the ability of the audience to understand and hence to affect and influence.¹⁰ Despite its changing status in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, rhetoric continued to shape intellectual and artistic thought. It is possible that music practitioners saw in its principles an inexhaustible source of inventiveness and inspiration. Erasmus's ideas can be traced in many later rhetorical and music-theoretical treatises.¹¹ Friedrich Erhard Niedt concentrates in his compositional treatise *Handleitung zur Variation* (1706) on the technique of finding many variants of the same simple figured bass idea and developing it into different dance genres. Heinichen, in his *Neu erfundene und Gründliche Anweisung zu vollkommener Erlernung des General-Basses* (1711), also considers the ability to create variations as central for the composer and states that a bad composer is one who is not capable of 'writing down twenty different versions of a single formula', clearly echoing the influence of Erasmus.¹² In his *Anfangsgründe zur musicalischen Setzkunst* (1754), Joseph Riepel outlines compositional processes based on the principles of Erasmus's creative variety, pointing to the rich diversity of functions that the different variants can potentially bring.¹³

Such an alternative understanding of the rhetorical influence on music places the accent not on the formal structural outline of a musical composition, but on the much more elusive and abstract concept of creative procedures as a way of thinking. Their guiding functional force was to stimulate the creation of a multiplicity of variants from a single idea. I believe that this compositional model is also relevant to the execution of music of the time. If this is the case, seemingly ambiguous or irregular articulation markings make sense as an attempt to extemporise a motif. Such irregularity resembles a creative game of discovering the full expressive potential of a musical idea or a pattern, which in many cases lies in the hands of the performers and depends on their mastery of their instruments.

¹⁰ The French philosopher Claude Buffier expressed similar ideas in his treatise *Traité de l'éloquence* from 1728. It turned out to be one of the most influential rhetorical works of the time and was translated into English, Spanish, German and Polish. The essence of his rhetoric is: 'forget all the rules and taxonomies, and concentrate on the real end basic means of eloquence – moving the soul by vivid expression.' See Thomas Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 196.

¹¹ Bettina Varwig, "'Mutato Semper Habitu': Heinrich Schütz and the Culture of Rhetoric', *Music and Letters*, 90/2 (2009), 215–39.

¹² Johann David Heinichen, *Neu erfundene und Gründliche Anweisung zu vollkommener Erlernung des General-Basses* (Hamburg: Schiller, 1711).

¹³ Seen from a different perspective, Riepel's compositional procedures lead to another influential source of creativity, those of the combinatorial mathematical permutations (*ars combinatoria*). This provides an important link between the seemingly remote domains of rhetoric (as verbal art) and mathematics (as representing transparent clarity and logic).

Without knowledge of the aesthetic and performance traditions of the time, it is impossible to decide what the 'correct' articulation is or even to distinguish intended from hasty markings. Most importantly, it is almost impossible to justify such norms, as Bach often uses the same motifs or figures to perform different functions in various places within the same piece of music. His markings often outline a process of deriving new figures or motifs from previously used ones, and this reveals a lot about his compositional techniques.¹⁴ Such ideas sharply contrast with the idea of applying normative templates of expected consistency.

In the spirit of the creative game of variety, I think Bach deliberately left most of his music open to further interpretations. Instead of providing fixed performance instructions, he left his manuscripts either unmarked, inviting the personal interpretations of the performers or, alternatively, with many varied performance indications (ornaments and articulation), which hint at many expressive possibilities. I believe such a viewpoint could open up a new perspective into Bach's compositional process and offers the opportunity to reinterpret his music in the light of the theories and aesthetic traditions of his time for our purposes today. This could help us to re-evaluate past historical or analytical understandings, uninfluenced by the preconceptions of our own age.

The longer the time between ourselves and Bach, the more our understanding of his music will change. By distancing ourselves from previous interpretative views of Bach, we have the chance to view his music from a different angle – as a constantly changing and evolving intellectual mechanism. I believe that such pluralism, combined with our growing detachment from Bach's time, can bring fresh insights into both his music and early music in general. In this way, instances of inconsistency or irregularity or even amorphous looking structures could open up new prospects of understanding Bach.

¹⁴ Butt, *Bach Interpretation*, pp. 186–91.