ON J. S. BACH'S *MUSICAL OFFERING* (*MUSIKALISCHES OPFER*, BWV 1079)

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J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering* grew out of a curious set of circumstances. Nearing the end of his life, Bach was in Potsdam on May 7, 1747. Bach was there to visit his son C. P. E. When Frederick the Great learned of his presence in the city, he summoned the "old Bach" to the city palace. Frederick was an avid flute player and employed C. P. E. in his court capelle, so this invitation is not very surprising. Once at the palace, the king asked Bach to try out the numerous fortepianos in his possession (numbering fifteen at one time). This was a new kind of instrument, capable of expressive depth and dynamic variation impossible on a harpsichord. Bach obliged the king and improvised on them to the delight of all persons present. Frederick then gave Bach a theme, the "royal theme" as it would be later called, which was supposedly composed by the king himself. He asked Bach to improvise a three-voice fugue using this theme. (What is a little funny about this request is that the king favored the lighter rococo style over strict Baroque polyphony. Further, the "royal theme" sounds like a caricature of the Baroque, and borders on the absurd for a fugal composition.) Bach improvised the three-voice fugue with grace and art, impressing all the musicians in

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attendance. Then Frederick asked the composer to improvise a six-voice fugue using the same theme. Bach refused to take on this nearly impossible task, in light of the nature of the "royal theme," and improvised a six-voice fugue on a theme he came up with himself.

Once Bach returned home to Leipzig ten days later, he composed the six-voice fugue Frederick had wanted. But Bach did not stop after completing this momentous feat. He composed additional pieces using the "royal theme" to create what is the *Musical Offering* — "a puzzling miscellany comprising a trio sonata, ten canons and two very different fugues" (in the words of Sir John Eliot Gardiner).[1] Moreover, the fugues are not called "fugues" in this set. Bach used the antiquated Italian term *ricercare* (*ricercar,* in German). The word refers to a polyphonic work common during the 16th and 17th centuries that employs counterpoint, a composition that precedes the fugue. With the word *ricercare*, Bach devised a clever acrostic in Latin: **R**egis **I**ussu **C**antio **E**t **R**eliqua **C**anonica **A**rte **R**esoluta: "At the king's demand, the song [that is, the fugue] and the remainder [the canonic movements] resolved with canonic art."[2] Bach clearly had Frederick in mind not only because he dedicated the work to him, but also because the three-voice and six-voice *ricercars* are composed for keyboard (a nod to the king's pianofortes) and the trio sonata calls for a transverse flute (the king's favored instrument). In principle, these were works that the king could play, enjoy, and solve (in the case of the riddle canons). Bach completed and published the *Musical Offering* within the span of a few months and sent a copy to King Frederick II. As it has been noted by historians, there is no record that Frederick offered Bach any compensation for this set (as was customary upon receiving a composition of this nature with a dedication). This has led many to wonder about the spirit behind the composition and its presentation as an offering.

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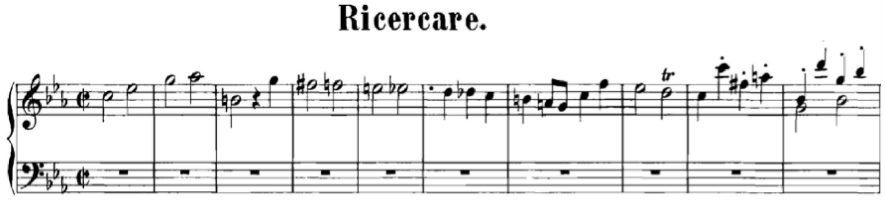

Figure 1. *Ricercare a 3* (three-voice fugue for keyboard), from *Musical Offering* (BWV 1079), mm. 1-10.

One gets the feeling from the *Musical Offering* that J. S. Bach, against all the odds, has presented the world with a masterpiece. At first hearing, it does not have the appeal of the *Brandenburg Concertos* or even the *Well-Tempered Klavier*. Bach composed the *Musical Offering* very late in life, where it seems he is testing out the very limits of counterpoint. What the *Musical Offering* says most openly, especially once we reach the six-voice fugue, is something about coherence in counterpoint. When we listen to the set of pieces, those timeless questions in aesthetics come to mind: "Do I like this?" and "Is this good art?" Our answers to these questions are not always as neat as we would like them to be.

Nevertheless, there is something telling about the fact that two greats from the 20th century Western art music world — Arnold Schoenberg and Charles Rosen — use the word "miracle" when writing about the *Musical Offering*. Rosen, on the six-voice fugue, claims: *it is a miracle of art*.[3] Schoenberg has a more global comment: "all the miracles that the *Musical Offering* presents are achieved by countersubjects, counter-melodies and other external additions."[4] Both, in their own way, suggest something from the outside. Rosen expresses his admiration for Bach's imagination and follow-through to put so many voices, in such elaborate counterpoint, within the grasp of two hands at the keyboard. Schoenberg's remark, however, has a gibe at its core: what is spontaneously genius and noteworthy in the *Musical Offering* is anything and everything that has nothing to do with the "royal theme."

It is true that the "royal theme" is a beast of a melody. It has three obvious weaknesses: it is too long; its rhythms are too varied to be used for the theme of a fugue with six voices (let alone three voices); and its chromatic section has an unfortunate way of calling attention to itself. It may raise a few eyebrows that composer Anton Webern had labeled the six-voice fugue "unapproachable as music,"[5] and yet Webern orchestrated it for a full orchestra. One thing that that fugue cannot get around is the fact that it is comprised of six voices. This kind of texture makes it understandable to have a six-piece ensemble play it, to pull apart the voices and

give them their own ample space. But Webern set the fugue in such a way that is sounds like a new object altogether. As a reconstruction of the past, it is dogged by an unnecessary sense of charity. Even if it was done for the sake of clarification as Carl Dahlhaus defends,[6] Webern's study suggests the opposite of what he probably wanted: a Baroque style is the only one suited for the thing, no matter how confusing the counterpoint sounds to the average listener.

Schoenberg's criticism that the musical miracles are all beyond the "royal theme" simplifies what is really going on. The set of pieces is based on the "royal theme," and this theme is everywhere. The theme *is* the *Musical Offering*. (And there is something satisfying about recognizing the "royal theme" throughout.) Schoenberg seems to think that we can separate the countersubjects and other accompanying bits from the theme; then, from that gathering, select those parts that do the aesthetic legwork. This kind of approach really won't do for this set of pieces. Bach's skill does not change the material of the work. And we cannot escape from the characteristic sound of the theme at every turn: those rhythms and that chromaticism. It is as fundamental to the thing as a person's posture is to their carriage.

The weakness of Webern's arrangement is how much its survey of the landscape adheres to Schoenberg's vision. It takes time to warm up to the "royal theme," considering its brutality (or, ugliness), and despite everything it starts to grow on you. We have to listen to the whole set multiple times, the canonical parts with the flute and violin especially, to feel the joy of this thing — that is, the joy of an academic challenge (or joke) turned art.

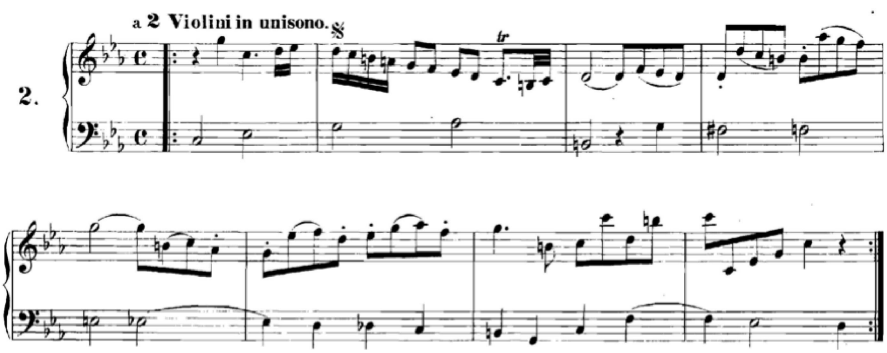

Figure 2. Canon 2. *a 2 violini* (in unison), *Canon perpetuus*, from *Musical Offering* (BWV 1079).

One of the most pleasing of the canonical pieces is the *canon 2. a 2 Violini in unisono*, *canon perpetuus*, with its loose start. The fresh air we sense here, the opening of a theoretical window, is for a few reasons. The most notable reason is because the "royal theme" is placed in the bass. As the violin leaps octaves over the theme, it alludes to a Vivaldi-type anxiety where a solo violin reaches across large intervals to build a pleasant harmony with a hint of melodic shape. The "external addition" of the treble melody we hear echoed cleanly in the violin is a kind of answer to the "royal theme," an accompaniment that sounds more melodic than the theme itself. But it is unfair to say the "royal theme" has nothing to do with this. The "royal theme," as a bass figure, works quite splendidly. It captures the elegance we find in examples of accompaniment figures we might consider *better* or *more interesting* than the actual melody or theme of a piece. The *Musical Offering* is an exercise in listening for any person who has ever had the impulse to say something like this. Take a listen here. Can we really be so sure of what we mean with this kind of assessment?

The trio sonata for transverse flute, violin, and continuo "*Sonata sopr'il Soggetto Reale*" is most unlike the canonical pieces and the fugues. The sonata balances the rococo with Bach's sensibility for music that is suitable and also intellectually stimulating. The "royal theme" blends into the whole, and it feels like Bach may have had the entire score engraved in stucco with gold leaf. Yet we may appreciate the approachability of this trio sonata as it comes like a welcome repose to the restless canons and the demanding architecture of the fugues.

In its own way, the trio highlights Bach's horizon. The trio is set off from the canons and the fugues in this newer style, the pleasing trend. On the surface, it likes to show off its novelty. By so doing, the trio has a way of dating Bach's counterpoint and appears to drive a wedge between itself and the rest of the set. There is no doubt that in the fugues we see the faint shadow of Bach's own teacher Buxtehude, like a figure in the doorway, beckoning the fugues to the polyphony of the past. (The chromaticism of the "royal theme" contributes even more to this effect.) With the complex canonical art, of solving musical riddles for an indelicate aesthetic reward, this

Bach is the "old Bach." The newer style, where we hardly notice the "royal theme," suggests that too much consonance can mark a saturation point. It is a mirror that reflects back an image we hardly recognize to be our own. We might feel tempted to think that the trio is not the "old Bach." But that is missing the point. When we do recognize the "royal theme" in the trio, it leaves a bad taste in our mouth. Note there is a difference here between our delight in the "royal theme" when we identify it in the six-voice fugue versus our attitude when we detect it in, say, the Allegro second movement of the trio sonata.

Let us give the *Musical Offering* a chance. Like Rosen and Schoenberg, we'll take a stab at this. We find the marvel of the work is somewhere else than where they described: it is locked within the listener's point of view. The miracle is that Bach took a theme that consistently resists beauty, transformed it into something that is academic at the same time as it is spellbinding, and painted it in warring styles to a point that we get all turned around. First we think that we enjoy the trio sonata best because of how light it is, but in the end we keep returning to that six-voice presentation of the theme. The *Musical Offering* is one of those exceptional cases where we are able to reconcile with our own musical taste. Sometimes what is good art and what we like can be the same thing.

Suggested recordings:

* J. S. Bach. *Musikalisches Opfer*. Camerata Kilkenny, Maya Recordings, 2011.

* J. S. Bach. *Musikalisches Opfer*. Bart Kuijken, Sigiswald Kuijken, Wieland Kuijken, Robert Kohnen, Gustav Leonhardt, RCA, 1975.

* J. S. Bach/Webern: *Fuga (Ricercata).* Boulez conducts Webern – II, Berliner Philharmoniker, Deutsche Grammophon, 1995.

[1] John Eliot Gardiner, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, [New York]: Vintage Books, 2015, 227.

[2] Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: the Learned Musician,* reprinted with corrections and new preface, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 429.

[3] Charles Rosen, *Critical Entertainments*: *Music Old and New,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, 46.

[4] Arnold Schoenberg, "Bach" (1950), 393-397, *Style and Idea*, *selected writings of Arnold Schoenberg. 60th Anniversary Edition,* Edited by Leonard Stein, translations by Leo Black, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 395.

[5] Anton Webern, "From the Correspondence" *Die Reihe 2* (1955), edited by Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen, (English edition), Bryn Mawr (PA): Theodore Presser Company, 1958, 19.

[6] Carl Dahlhaus, "Analytical instrumentation: Bach's six part ricercar as orchestrated by Anton Webern" 181-191, in *Schoenberg and the New Music,* translated by Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1990.