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INTERPRETIVE IMPLICATIONS

OF ARCHITECTURE

IN

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

by

Shane Fellows

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree*

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

in

MUSIC

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

1997

The purpose of the present essay is to attempt the formulation of a plausible approach to the interpretive performance of music. Such, if successful, would be of special import in the effective and thoughtful rendition of all music; but especially in those numerous cases where application of performance practice is conjectural. This does not constitute an attempt at the definition of "authentic performance". Rather it is an effort in the direction of the establishment of defensible and especially of objective interpretive guidelines. By no means do I submit that this approach is the only plausible one; but the one which is most reliable in my experience. Likewise, I intend no notion that my understanding should supersede that of any person or example herein cited. I simply mean to formulate and codify the approach which seems to present itself most logically and objectively from my own experience and from the reading of the chosen source materials.

I believe that the true character of a work of art is so strong, that when intelligently and conscientiously pursued, it will sufficiently assert itself so as to betray inappropriate performance practices, unwarranted dogma, etc. Less important details may not become apparent; but issues which determine its artistic merit will. I assert that even in cases where nothing but the notes themselves are left by the composer, this essence is amply conveyed. Such is what I hope to illustrate.

As a means for this exploration, I take the "Passacaglia and Fugue" in C minor for organ by Johann Sebastian Bach (BWV 582). Four critical volumes will be used to construct and

corroborate the submitted philosophy:

Musical Form and Musical Performance

by Edward T. Cone

W.W. Norton, 1968

Playing the Organ Works of Bach: Some Case Studies

by Peter Williams

American Guild of Organists, 1987

Making Music on the Organ

by Peter Hurford

Oxford University Press, 1994

What to Listen for in Music

by Aaron Copland

McGraw-Hill, 1939

(Pagination according to Mentor Books printing, 1988)

Additionally, two professional recordings of the stated work will be analyzed: The rendition from the complete Bach organ works recording by Wolfgang Rubsam (Philips, 1977) and that from "Johann Sebastian Bach: Dorische Toccata & Fuge, Passacaglia" by Karl Richter (Archiv/Polydor Int'l GmbH, Hamburg, 1980).

Mr. Williams' book commences with a series of submissions. Among them he states:

- 1) "The duty of all players, at whatever level and for whatever purpose they play, is to communicate, if only to themselves." (Williams, p. 1)
- 2) "The duty of the player is to communicate what the composer had in mind."
(Williams, p. 1)

These two points form the core of my argument. There seems to be no end to the corpus

of commentary and would-be authority on "correct interpretation" of music. This is especially the case with figures in early music. One thing we must simply face is that there are some things we will never know. All manner of obscurity is cited by numerous interpreters to justify their views and practices. Some of these approaches are more defensible than are others. Particularly with Bach, there is an overabundance of "groping at straws" as musicians undertake to construct an "authentic performance". In this connection Mr. Hurford states:

Nowhere in the organ repertory is such a pragmatic aspect of interpretation so strong as in Bach's organ works, and there are as many different approaches to interpretation as there are schools in which the organ works are taught. Nevertheless, no musician dare lay claim to his interpretation being closest to the ideal, for practically nothing is known of the manner in which Bach played his own music save that the results invariably enthralled his listeners. (Hurford, p. 91)

When I was fifteen, I had the opportunity to witness a radio broadcast which originated in Vienna, Austria. The occasion was the tercentenary of the birth of Bach. A program of Bach organ works was the presentation and the recital was the inaugural concert of a pipe organ built in the manner of organs Bach played. It was a total Bach celebration. The organist in charge of the concert and building of the organ was Herr Martin Haselbock, world renowned concert organist. He selected one of the two players whose recordings we shall consider. He chose him from the scores of organists who would have gladly obliged. The performance thrilled me beyond description. Never had Bach, as Mr. Williams puts it, "communicated" so well to me.

When I presented some of this playing in a university class some years later, it met with considerable opposition. Also, my use of some of the ideas was not happily received when I employed them in my own interpretations. Hard as I tried to be objective, I could not resolve to

altogether ignore them.

I later felt consolation about my feelings when I learned that the originator of these ideas was being commissioned to record the complete Bach organ works for the third time and that he was to be the featured artist to close a National (and international, for that matter) Convention of the American Guild of Organists. Moreover, he had won the International Grand Prix de Chartres for interpretation in organ playing in Paris and Chartres, France. Clearly, I was not alone in my approval of his Bach playing.

In discussing performance of Bach's works we often hear such terms as "pulled out of proportion" and "romantic"; i.e. anachronistic. "It's too fast" or "too slow" or "It's so dry" or "dull". "It's flamboyant" or "overdone", "misshapen". Study and observation have shown me the wisdom behind Mr. Hurford's statement that "practically nothing is known". The interpretational variations among fine performers are legion. Moreover, much Bach "research" of the twentieth century seems suspect.

So on what can we base an interpretation? What do we know and how can we best apply it? I wish to focus on what is known about Bach, his music, his time and about music generally. I think that much can be gained by reconstructing the context in which the music originated insofar as practicable. The rest is conjectural and I gladly agree that within these bounds, anything artistic is acceptable. Certainly many worthy variations will exist within these parameters.

What I have undertaken to do here is to find a means to better understand the playing which seems so communicative to me, and to formulate guidelines whereby to eliminate clearly ineffective interpretational ideas from my own approach. In doing so, I hope to be as objective

and research-based as possible.

All evidence I am aware of indicates the validity of Mr. Hurford's statement that Bach "enthralled his listeners". If this is true, two things become apparent: 1) Bach communicated to (maybe even with) his audience when he played his works, and 2) If a person wishes to attempt the elusive (and impossible) "definitive performance", one prerequisite would be that it communicate and enthrall.

If we wish to "communicate what the composer had in mind", as Mr. Williams suggests, we need to make use of all reasonable evidence left by the composer as to what he intended. On some matters, Bach was explicit; on most, he was only implicit. However, I believe that evidence of the truth is always available to the sincere seeker of it; regardless of the subject. I believe there are many clues as to Bach's implications.

Mr. Williams must be largely right when he says, "...it is all there in the notes of Bach, if only he [the player] is alerted to find it". (Williams, p. 2) So how does architecture help the player find what Bach was saying? Mr. Cone asserts, "...the more complex any musical dimension becomes, the fewer liberties of interpretation it permits". (Cone, p. 37) Is this not true? The more integrated a work is, the more undeniable its true nature becomes; the less room there is for error in interpretation.

Can anyone wittingly contend against Bach's near supremacy in the tightness and integrity of his composition? The architecture seems so well and tightly woven as to employ no unnecessary element. Every detail is necessary in the total picture. Nothing to Bach's purpose is lacking. Nothing is superfluous. Each element has its place and meaning. I submit that these

facts alone, if properly understood, remove much of the room for conjecture and error.

Does this mean that every worthy rendition will be identical to the rest? I say "no". But I think there are some issues about which we argue that are clearly illuminated by this theory. If the approach we take to the performance of a work does not give proper respect to each of the elements of the composition, if it does not satisfy every bit of understanding we can establish beyond reasonable doubt, something is obviously not in accordance with the intentions of the composer. As we begin studying what we can determine about the composer's intentions from the score and undertake to find the medium which answers to the demands of each of the elements there communicated, we will gradually come to terms with the true character of the piece. Tempi, articulation, nuance, registration and the like will suggest themselves to us to the degree that we holistically understand the integrity of the structure. When they are properly applied, they will each enhance the structure and in no way obscure any element of it. This is the crux of the matter; wholeness and integrity of all parts of the work.

When we consider one of the great sculptures of Michelangelo, every facet is in place and proportion. If one element were slightly larger, a bit smaller, one degree off center, the whole would suffer. The lustre of the work would fall. It might still be a good piece of work, even admirable. But it would not be right. All of the details of the work would not have received due attention. Healthy as one part of the organism might be, the general health would falter. The "rendition" would not be what it could be. But that is not the case. Nor should it be with Bach or anyone else. When we understand the integrity of the work: the harmony, the rhythm, the motifs, the counterpoint, the form, we have a basis upon which to construct our approach. The tempo, the registration, the nuance, the articulation and every other detail of

performance should conform to what Bach left to us in the architecture. This, I understand to be one valuable interpretation of the statement by Mr. Copland:

The prime consideration in all form is the creation of a sense of the 'long line'....That long line must give us a sense of direction , and we must be made to feel that that direction is the *inevitable one*. Whatever the means employed, the net result must produce in the listener a satisfying feeling of *coherence* born out of the psychological necessity of the musical ideas with which the composer began. (Copland, p. 117, Emphases mine).

Elsewhere he says:

...whatever the form the composer chooses to adopt, there is always one great desideratum: The form must have what in my student days we used to call *la grande ligne* (the long line). It is difficult adequately to explain the meaning of that phrase to the layman. To be properly understood in relation to a piece of music, it must be felt. In mere words, it simply means that every good piece of music must give us a sense of flow --a sense of continuity from first note to last. Every elementary music student knows the principle, but to put it into practice has challenged the greatest minds in music! A great symphony is a man-made Mississippi down which we irresistibly flow from the instant of our leave-taking to a long foreseen destination. Music must always flow, for that is part of its very essence, but the creation of that continuity and flow--that long line--constitutes the be-all and end-all of every composer's existence. (Copland, p. 32)

Is it really possible that someone of the caliber of J.S. Bach could have failed at this?

That there would not be a "long line" and a certain direction which is "the inevitable one"? Is it conceivable that multitudes of interpretational clues about something so central would not abound in the integrity of the architecture as represented on the printed page? I submit it is not. Bach's "Mississippi" is there to be found and it is comprehensible.

Again, I believe that there are many valid nuances. I intend that my ideas should liberate, not captivate. In other words, if what I am saying is true, as based upon the writing and thinking of the considered sources, then it, like all truth, should vindicate and support every sincere attempt and lead us closer to what we seek in our interpretations. My feeling is in part well

articulated by Mr. Cone:

Most people would probably agree that, even if a perfect interpretation is conceivable it is hardly possible of achievement, and that every actual performance must be at best an approximation of it. Still, many of us are vaguely comforted by the notion of one interpretation that, in some Platonic realm, constitutes *the* music as precisely as a picture is a picture, a statue is a statue, and a building is a building. According to this view, the space arts are fortunate, since they are fixed and unchanging; the time arts (which would include drama and all other forms of literature as well as music) are subject to readings, performances, and interpretations, all of which distort the true essence of the work of art. Nevertheless, this essence remains there, somewhere, to be discovered and, so far as possible, exposed. (Cone, p.33)

My main point of departure, as stated, is the architecture; the notes, the form, the rhythms, the texture etc. I assert these represent the skeletal structure of a sculpture; of the 'David' of Michelangelo, perhaps. In our case, however, it is left to us to supply flesh appropriate to the skeleton. This is the heart and challenge of the issue. This is the question of interpretation. My intent is not to explore how to find "the one way that is right". Much rather, it is to see how much can be learned from the bone structure in order to supply it with the best possible physique type. Again, there will be multiple physiques which are worthy of emulation. I am simply trying, as was said of Michelangelo, "to remove everything *[which] is [clearly] not* the 'David'". (Emphasis mine.)

To continue the analogy, we know that when the skeleton of an animal or human being is found, especially when it is one of ancient date, scientists can tell us much about the nature of the organism. Weight, height, perhaps diet and other things can be ascertained. Not everything becomes clear. But would we not be foolish to not learn every possible thing from that skeletal system? I say "yes".

I would then proceed by examining, to an extent, the bones of the Passacaglia. Mr.

Copland says of the piece:

One of the finest examples in all musical literature, and one which is invariably quoted when the form [that of passacaglia] is under discussion, is Bach's great organ Passacaglia in C minor....The lay listener is encouraged to study the notes or the recording many times, as few compositions will better repay careful listening. (Copland, p. 152)

Furthermore, he states:

Speaking generally, the composer has two objectives in treating the passacaglia form. First, with the addition of each new variation the theme must be seen in a new light. In other words, interest in the oft repeated ground bass must be aroused and sustained and added to by the composer's creative imagination. Secondly, aside from the beauty of any one variation, taken alone, they must all together gather cumulative momentum, so that the form as a whole may be psychologically satisfying. This second objective has been particularly true since Bach's time. (Copland, p.151)

Bach handles this with great mastery. As is traditional with the form, he introduces the ground bass unaccompanied. It is slow and deliberate. Then comes the first variation. We take the first, small step upward in momentum. The texture thickens, but the suspensions and escape tones, etc. maintain the sense of near lethargy. With the third variation, we find another significant change. The shape of the accompaniment becomes quite lyrical and the momentum seems to increase by virtue of the straightforward nature of the melodic structures. The rhythms used are much more directional than the previous suspensions, etc. Another adjustment comes at bar 32. The accompaniment now mixes eighth and sixteenth notes. Again we add speed and direction by virtue of the structure. This continues later in that the sixteenth-note momentum becomes constant and even more directional at bar 48. At bar 72 the sixteenth patterns become less directional but more agitated. Finally, at bar 80, it seems to lose all inhibition and becomes very virtuosic, directional and fluid. At bar 112 we find a moment of relative respite which becomes even lighter and more playful at bar 120. The texture is thin and the motion is much more

disjunct than before. At bar 129 the energy from before the short relief returns with increase and builds to the end of the passacaglia, culminating in a grand climax. Then the fugue begins.

Perhaps this would suffice to convey an outline of my understanding of the structure. Bach reveals to us much about the emotional, the communicative side of the work, simply by means of the notes on the paper. This piece clearly gains emotional momentum and builds to an incredible climax at the end.

I should like now to study how the two performers interpret it and explain how I understand the quotations, etc. previously explained. I shall confine the analyses to the passacaglia portion of the work as I feel it supplies adequate material for illustration of my ideas.

Performers have at their command a series of elements with which to make their interpretations. These are the components whereof they construct the flesh. Especially important are tempo, dynamics, color, articulation and nuance in general. Prior to beginning, I wish to reemphasize two of Mr. Copland's statement's: 1) That about the importance of the inevitable direction, the long line, and, 2) The importance of the passacaglia's building of momentum as a whole, so as to be "psychologically satisfying".

I shall admit immediately that the first of the performances represented on the cassette is more convincing to me. After repeated listenings, I am convinced that it better accomplishes the goals outlined in this paper, namely that effective renditions must embody a true sense of communication, a clear sense of the "long line" i.e. of coherence of all dimensions.

How is this accomplished? The first player begins with a simple but adequate registration, appropriate to the structure which begins modestly. The tempo and tonal color chosen allow clear room for necessary building later. At bar 16 he chooses to represent the flow

of the accompanimental lines above the obviousness of the new repetition in the ground bass. This enhances integrity and flow. He does not play the variations for the sake of the piece, but plays the piece as it consists of variations. This will reassert itself again and again. At bar 24, the registrational change enhances the adjustments in the accompaniment. The accompaniment becomes vocal and more fluid. The change in color grants relief without attracting attention to itself. At bar 29, there is a series of three "melodic sighs". The nuance employed highlights them without distortion and simultaneously leads into an effective, meaningful cadence on beat one of bar 32. The variation here introduced is well carved by means of appropriate intra-linear velocity. The direction and musical intention of the lines are well enhanced by the phrasing. At bar 48, the articulation employed represents the growing momentum through increased vitality. At bar 64, we have a cadence well crafted by judicious nuance. The cadence enhances the structural integrity. In the variation here introduced the melodic apexes are well heeded by delicate and refined nuance. Direction and momentum continue to build both in the architecture and in the interpretation. I long for a stronger cadence at bar 72. The variation introduced by bar 80 is executed by a tidy rhythmic flow, which I feel is indicated by the uninterrupted sixteenth notes. I would be more gratified by a slightly higher tempo at this point. The momentum needs to build more. I feel this is represented in the notes by their continual flow and very obvious, deliberate melodic direction. At bar 104 the player changes registration. It grants relief, but no element in the rendition detracts from the sense of momentum. The same can be said at the change in bar 112. This adjustment can be dangerous and with some performers is. It is so easy to lose the psychological satisfaction to the obvious respite dictated by the notes. The texture

thins. The piece becomes lighter. This is represented by the performer's choices of color and articulation. But in no way does the intensity or direction suffer. This variation is still part of the whole piece. It does not attract attention to itself. Such cannot be said of all interpretations. In bar 128 the intensity returns. This is clear from the thickness and chordal nature of the structure. The chosen registration well reflects the drama. The architecture and registration are in harmony. The momentum continues to build with the variation at bar 136. The structure shows this in the unrelenting triplet figures with repeated notes. The chosen articulation highlights the sense of drama and enthusiasm. Again the variation belongs to the piece and the articulation illuminates its belonging while illustrating the building momentum of the whole. At bar 161 the texture thickens and builds to the final cadence of the passacaglia. Here the chosen tempo is stately, the articulation adds to the drama and the accents lend direction. The whole builds to a satisfying cadence at the end of the passacaglia. This rendition of the cadence gives a sense of arriving at the inevitable point after a journey following the "long line" in an enthralling manner.

The other rendition, while respectable and while containing many elements of fine playing, seems less successful in the stated objectives. Why? The organist begins with a good tempo and choice of stops. The deliberateness of the theme and accompaniment are well represented in the first bars. But, the need for illustrating a building momentum, clearly apparent from the structure at bar 24, seems unheeded. The phrases leading into the cadence in bar 32 lack the nuance necessary to enhance the emotional direction inherent in the melodic structure. At bar 64, the direction of the notes is not clearly represented in the phrasing. Psychological satisfaction seems wanting. The registration in this variation is distracting and unclear. It does not contribute to the sense of long line and coherence of the piece as a whole. It

attracts attention to itself. The change of registration beginning the variation at bar 72 is too drastic for the good of the whole piece. It is distracting. The tempo and articulation in this variation lend a sense not of agitation, as the disjunct motion would indicate, but of lethargy. The fluid sixteenths at bar 80 sing well, but again, they fail to heed the added momentum and direction implicit in the flowing patterns. In bar 96, the playing is more heavy than intense. Here, as many other times, the rendition seems to be one of the variations for themselves rather than of the variations as part of an integrated whole. Continuity lacks at the change in bar 104. The change in registration is too drastic for the integrity. The momentum suffers. The same things are manifested at bar 112. Momentum suffers again at bar 120. The direction and tempo do not illustrate the place of the part in the structure of the whole. Continuity and momentum lack at bar 129. The articulation in the variation beginning bar 136 attracts attention to itself, not to the whole. Finally, the emotional increase apparent in the thickening texture at the end of the piece is not represented. It lacks drive and emotion. The final cadence is not set off in the articulation and nuance so as to be inevitable. This, the crowning chord of the passacaglia, the goal of the entire 168 preceding bars, seems more to surprise than to gratify. I feel neither enthralled nor psychologically satisfied.

To be clear, I wish to state that I do not find the second rendition "bad" per se. It contains much of fine playing. I simply find it inferior to the first in accomplishing the tasks which I feel are clearly set before it.

To make a summary, I would submit that these illustrations show how much vital detail can be gleaned from the notes. I do not imply that the first performer has achieved perfection nor

that the second is devoid of fine understanding. But I do assert, in the strongest fashion , that if an honest, committed player will approach music in the way here described, searching for the means which truly answer to the demands apparent in the notes, the character of the work will come forward. It will fill in the necessary interpretive details not elsewhere preserved.

This way is not simple or easy. It will not happen overnight nor will it ever be totally exhausted. But I contend that such an on-going approach contains the answers we seek. It will not allow us to impose true anachronisms; nuance maybe, but that is the essence of art. Bach in the style of Chopin will be impossible. Finally, I believe this philosophy to be more sound than reliance on the tradition or prejudice to which many players and writers appeal.

Chordal Analysis of Passacaglia Harmonization

Note No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Var. No.															
1	i	V ⁴	i	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	iv ⁶	iv ⁷	V ⁴	vii ⁴	i ⁶	vii ⁰	i	iv ⁷	V ⁴	i
2	i	V ⁴	III ⁷	iv	III ⁺	ii ⁰⁴	iv ⁷	V ⁴	vii ⁰	i ⁶	vii ⁰	i	iv ⁷	V ⁴	i
3	i	V ⁴	III ⁷	iv	III ⁺	VI ⁷	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	vii ⁶	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	ii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	i
4	i	V ⁴	i ⁶	iv ⁷	V ⁴	VI	iv	V ⁴	vii	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	iv ⁷	i ⁶	i
5	i	V ⁴	i	iv ⁷	V ⁴	VI	iv	ii ⁰	V ⁴	V ⁷	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	V ⁷	i
6	i	V ⁴	i ⁶	iv	V ⁴	VI ⁷	iv	V ⁴	vii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	iv	i ⁶	i
7	i	V ⁴	i ⁶	iv	V ⁴	VI	iv	V ⁴	vii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	vii ⁰	i	iv	V ⁴	i
8	i	V ⁴	III	iv	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	vii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	vii ⁰	i	N ⁶	V ⁴	i
9	i	V ⁴	i	iv	v	VI	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	vii ⁰⁴	i ⁶	ii ⁰⁴	i	ii ⁰⁴	III ⁶	i
10	i	V ⁴	i	iv	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰	V ⁴	vii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	i
11	i	V ⁴	i	iv	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰	V ⁴	V ⁴	i	vii ⁰⁶	i	ii ⁰	V ⁴	i
12	i	V ⁴	VI	iv ⁶	v ⁰	iv	ii	V ⁴	V ⁴	i	vii ⁶	i ⁶	IV ⁶	V ⁴	i
13	i	V ⁴	i	iv	i ⁷	iv	iv	V ⁴	V ⁴	i	V ⁴	VI	V ⁴	V ⁴	i
14	i	V ⁴	i	iv	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	?	III	V ⁴	i	ii ⁰⁶	i	i
15	i	V ⁴	i	iv	III ⁺	VI	ii ⁰⁷	V ⁴	vii ⁰	i	V ⁴	i	ii ⁰	V ⁴	i
16	i	V ⁴	i	iv	i ⁴	VI	iv ⁷	V ⁴	V ⁴	i ⁶	VI ⁶	i	iv	V ⁴	i
17	i	i ⁴	i	iv	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	vii ⁶	i ⁶	VI ⁶	i	iv	V ⁴	i
18	i	V ⁴	i ⁶	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	VI	ii ⁰⁶	V ⁴	vii ⁰	i ⁶	vii ⁰	iv	iv	V ⁴	i
19	i	i ⁴	i ⁶	iv ⁷	i ⁴	VI	iv	i ⁴	V ⁴	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	iv	V ⁴	i
20	i	i ⁴	i ⁶	i	i ⁴	VI	i	i ⁴	vii ⁰⁶	i ⁶	V ⁴	i	iv ⁷	V ⁴	i

Analysis of Fugue

Bar:	C: ①	⑤	⑥	⑫	⑬	⑮	G: ⑳	㉔	E ^b : ㉑
S	S	A	C-S1	C-S1	A	C-S2			
A	C-S1		C-S2	S				C-S1	
T								C-S2	
B									
		C: ㉓	B ^b : ㉔	㉕	㉖	㉗	㉘	㉙	C: ㉚
S	㉓	㉔	㉕	㉖	㉗	㉘	㉙	㉚	
A	C-S2		A	C-S1		C-S2		C-S2	
T	C-S1			C-S2	A	C-S1	S	C-S1	
B									
			G: ㉛	㉜	㉝	㉞	C: ㉟		C: ㊱
S	㉛	㉜	㉛	㉜	㉝	㉞	㉟	C	
A	A			S		C-S1		O	
T		C-S1		C-S1				D	
B		C-S2		C-S2		C-S2		A	

A = Answer

Letters above bar nos. indicate cadences.