

A Graphic Understanding of Bach's Organ Music: Analysis as a Key to Understanding and Performing the Music of J. S. Bach

Benefits of Analysis

- Perhaps the fundamental pursuit of a musician is to be *musical*. This involves playing the notes, but more importantly it bespeaks an understanding of musical techniques and language, the ability to express the inherent qualities and/or characteristics of a piece. Further, it denotes being at home with the *style*, the musical elements, the requisite techniques—the music must be able to sing freely.
- Understanding the musical form/structure—a fundamental need
- Identification of musical motives and/or subjects (becoming more aware of the “grammar” of the composition, i.e., what the piece is about)
- Analysis may influence decisions re: registrations, manual changes, articulations, phrasing, etc. (these aspects should complement and not conflict with the integrity of the work—for example, manual changes should help clarify form and not be imposed upon a piece to simply achieve contrast).
- The analysis process leads to a better understanding of a composer and his creative thinking and/or the compositional process
- Musical elements perhaps previously unnoticed may become clear (or at least clearer), thus helping us better appreciate both the work and its position in the composer's oeuvre.
- Careful analysis helps us look more closely at what we play and invites a more thoughtful approach to musical art forms that are both deeply moving and somewhat elusive in that music is always “in transit.”
- When done consistently and carefully, analysis facilitates an understanding of a composer's style and the “evolution” of the particular compositional style. (Students frequently ask how one can date a work within the composer's corpus of music.)
- Analysis is key to better appreciating the unique properties of a piece—both relationships within a work and the piece's relation to other works.
- We need to make music ourselves, else why practice and play? When appropriately used, analysis (hence, understanding) can help us become more musical in our playing.
- This information, combined with a knowledge of the organs the composer knew, or that he wrote for, may define how we look at a piece and shape our approach to the work. It

may also affect the way we look at a particular instrument as an essential aspect of “bringing the music to life” for our audience.

- Why do I love the music of Bach? Analyzing form, motivic development, harmony, etc., can define why the music is so beautiful—and knowing that will change the way the music is approached.
- Composers draw on a particular “vocabulary” when composing. Their pieces bear their respective trademarks—Bach looks like Bach, Beethoven looks like Beethoven, Brahms looks like Brahms—harmonic analysis helps acquaint us with the vocabulary and grammar they use. Becoming aware of that vocabulary, their preferences and their musical trademarks gives definition to their individual styles.
- Baroque composers often used the “Doctrine of Affections” or *Affektenlehre* when writing a piece. Learning about and being sensitive to the particular *Affekt* or “mood” may be useful. We can ask ourselves—“What is the mood or affect of this piece?” This may have particular application in chorale-based works.
- Though we may have played a piece and feel very familiar with it (even with having played it numerous times), careful analysis invites us to approach a work afresh, and we will most probably gain new insights.
- Analysis can facilitate 1) learning a piece faster and better—musical elements take on specific meaning and are not simply a series of notes; 2) making decisions re: fingering and pedaling—e.g., when we see a recurring motive or figure we may choose to use a consistent fingering or pedaling pattern; 3) seeing cadences, musical climaxes (high points of the composition); 4) understanding the “style” of the work.
- Having analyzed a work, we know where the piece is going, *and* we know where we are going when we play it. This instills confidence, can help us maintain focus and avoid mistakes, and it ultimately frees us to be more musical when we perform.

How?

- Though a knowledge of music theory and musical form is very helpful and may “ease” the process, a lack of that background is not necessarily an impediment to learning more about a piece.
- Make a copy of the score (a first time through a piece may get a bit “messy” and you may not wish to mark up your performing score), and then *with a pencil* begin looking at the piece carefully to see how it is put together, what ideas are used, and note your observations.
- Consider the score carefully. What kind of piece is it—perhaps a prelude, fugue, chorale-

based work? Look for patterns (melodies, motives, rhythms, etc.) that occur throughout the work. This takes considerable time and is not necessarily done at the keyboard (I prefer working away from the keyboard because it invites me to use other senses), but the effort is well worth the result. Analyzing and “learning notes” are two different activities and processes—i.e., practicing at the keyboard seldom accomplishes analysis.

- Remember, the great composers tend to be very “frugal” or conservative in the number of ideas used within any given piece—Bach tends to use only a handful of ideas within his works—hence, one can usually expect to see a small number of ideas used very well and in a variety of ways.
- Try writing out some of the voices in “open score” (like an orchestral score—several keyboard composers including Frescobaldi, Buxtehude and Bach wrote keyboard works in this format). Writing notes changes the ways we view music—we become more involved in the musical process. There is an important difference between looking at and writing notes. One might recall that much of Bach’s own musical training came from his copying of music—e.g., the copying of music in his brother’s library, the copying of de Grigny’s *Livre d’orgue* (1703), or his copying of Vivaldi’s concerti and then transcribing them for the organ concertos.
- After you have made your analysis and think you are done, then refer to the available discussions and analyses of the Bach works done by others (Spitta, Schweitzer, Keller—all earlier; and more recently, Williams, Stauffer, Stinson [his discussions of the *Orgelbüchlein* and the *Leipzig Eighteen*], and several German analyses, such as those by Konrad Küster and Alfred Dürr—refer to the Bibliography). Come to terms with them (working with the score in front of you) and understand what they have to offer—here again, consistent effort will pay big dividends. (One will see that individual viewpoints may differ in some particulars, and you may not always agree with them, but each will have something of significance to offer.) But a caution—attempt to do all you can first—if you discover something in the music, you will be much more apt to remember it than if you are simply reading someone else’s work.
- Try summarizing your findings in a graph—thus creating a graphic representation of what the piece does (this works particularly well with fugues). The advantage of a graph is that one can better see “in bold relief” the significant structural qualities of a work, and that in turn may help you in your approach to and understanding of the work involved. Creating a graph can be a challenge as you wrestle with how the piece is structured and try to determine how to illustrate that structure in a graphic representation. For example, in a fugue, there may be questions concerning how many sections are in the fugue, how are those sections defined, how do tonal centers affect the structure, is there a countersubject or two or three countersubjects and how do they affect structure, etc. These are not easy questions, but again—this kind of musical study will be very enlightening, and will greatly enhance both the understanding and enjoyment of the work.

Glossary of Terms

Cantus firmus – A pre-existing melody (frequently a hymn tune) that is used as the basis of a composition. The organ chorales of the *Orgelbüchlein*, for instance, use a chorale tune as the starting point, or theme for the respective pieces in the collection.

Doctrine of Affections – An aesthetic theory of the late baroque period, formulated by Andreas Werckmeister (1702), J. D. Heinichen (1711), Johann Mattheson (1739), and others. It is treated in greatest detail by Mattheson (*Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 1739) who classifies more than 20 affections and describes how they should be expressed in music. For example, "Sorrow should be expressed with a slow-moving, languid and drowsy melody, broken with many sighs," and "Hate is represented by repulsive and rough harmony and a similar melody." These rather simple explanations make it somewhat difficult to formulate the *doctrine of affections* with absolutes. There is no doubt, however, that musicians of the late baroque, and especially in Germany, were fully familiar with this aesthetic approach and often incorporated it in their various compositions. A basic trait of the *Doctrine* is that each composition (or movement of a multi-movement work) should embody only one affection. The pieces of Bach uniformly follow this pattern—e.g., the chorales in the *Orgelbüchlein*.

Fugue – The most mature form of imitative counterpoint, developed during the 17th century and brought to perfection by J. S. Bach. A fugue may stand alone, may be paired with a prelude or toccata, or may be incorporated within a larger piece, such as one finds in the *Praeludia* of Buxtehude. The various components of a fugue follow:

Subject – A short melody, or theme, stated at the beginning of a fugue, and upon which a fugue is based. The subject is stated at the beginning of the fugue by one voice alone; it is then taken up by the other voices in close succession and reappears throughout the entire piece in all the voices at different places. The space between one statement and the next is filled in by freely invented counterpoint, which is usually unified by the use of recurrent motifs.

Countersubject – After the initial statement of the subject, and at the point where the second voice states the subject, the first voice may continue with another contrapuntal idea that will usually accompany further statements of the subject. It may appear throughout the fugue, or only in a particular section of the fugue. Frequently, Bach fugues may introduce more than one countersubject in the course of the work, and those various countersubjects usually correspond to the various sections of the fugue.

Exposition – The opening section of a fugue wherein the subject, or theme, appears at least once in each voice. For example, if the fugue is for four voices, SATB, the subject will appear at least once in each of those parts before the exposition concludes. The exposition may include one more statement than the number of parts, e.g., four in a three-voice fugue, five in a four-voice fugue, etc., although this is not the usual procedure. Within the fugue there may be three, four, or more expositions (statements of the subject) where the subject appears once, or a few times in succession before an episode. These internal expositions

frequently involve modulations into other keys, such as the relative minor, dominant, or subdominant, with a return to the main key in the last exposition of subject entry.

Episode – A section of the fugue that does not include a statement of the fugue subject. The episodes are based primarily on short motives derived from the subject or from its continuation (the countersubject). They frequently use sequential treatment, i.e., the successive repetition of the motive—these may function to move from one harmonic area to another. The over-all structure of a fugue is an alternation of expositions (statements of the subject) and episodes. Although the episodes maintain strict counterpoint, they often employ a lighter texture (fewer voices) and are somewhat freer.

Subject/Answer – The initial statement of a subject (usually in the tonic key) is followed by a second statement (or answer) in the next voice. The normal key sequence is the subject appears in the tonic (or home) key, and the answer appears in the dominant (a fifth above—or fourth below) the pitch of the subject. Hence, in a four-voice fugue, the normal sequence of subject statements would be subject (I key), answer (V key), subject (I key), and answer (V key). The subject and answer may also be referred to as the “antecedent and consequent,” or *dux* (leader) and *comes* (follower). If the answer is an exact transposition of the intervals used in the subject, the fugue is “real”, if the answer involves the modification of certain steps, such as the replacement of a fifth by a fourth, the fugue is considered “tonal”.

Stretto – The imitation of the subject in close succession, with the answer entering before the subject is completed, resulting in an overlapping of the subject. This produces an increased intensity that is especially effective for the close of the fugue.

Prelude (Praeludium) – A piece of music designed to be played as an introduction to another composition, such as a fugue or suite, or which may stand alone. It represents the earliest type of idiomatic keyboard music (as opposed to typed based or modeled after vocal music). The combining of the Prelude with another composition begins about 1650. The piece may be free and rather improvisatory (usually the case in the early Preludes of Bach), or as is usually found in the later works of Bach, the prelude may be patterned on the *Concerto* form used by the Italian composers and utilize a *ritornello* form.

Ritornello/ritornello form – A term often used for the typical form of the first and frequently the last movement of the baroque concerto, especially in the *concerto grosso* (such as the various concertos of Vivaldi). These movements consist of an alternation of tutti and solo sections, the tutti sections being based on identical material while the solo sections vary. Hence, the tutti sections therefore form the ritornello. In the Bach preludes using this form, the ritornello will appear at the beginning of the piece, will be followed by an episode (related to the solo sections), and will usually proceed in this fashion: Ritornello / episode / ritornello / episode / ritornello / episode / ritornello (there is no prescribed number of ritornelli or episodes).

Selected Bibliography

(This is a chronological listing)

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(These books all contain good analytic discussions and can be very useful in guiding or helping one approach analyzing. Good theory books can provide information that will facilitate doing harmonic analysis.)