

## Bach at the keyboard: the organist at home

We live in an age when music which J. S. Bach composed for the harpsichord is often described as for 'keyboard', to allow its performance on the modern piano. For different reasons, that designation is quite appropriate for many of Bach's works. Two centuries before Bach's time, keyboard music became a separate genre, and a tradition was then established which outlived Bach, having a few decades to run before disappearing towards the end of the eighteenth century. It was a tradition of flexibility, in which it was natural for a lot of music to work very well on more than one keyboard instrument – even on two as dissimilar as the harpsichord and the organ. This really was Keyboard Music. With this in mind, this article will suggest that the organ was often in Bach's mind even when writing music which we usually associate with other instruments, like the harpsichord.

J. S. Bach was a complete musician: he had roles as teacher, composer, conductor, concert organiser, choir-master; purchaser, tuner, and technician of and authority on all kinds of keyboard instrument – and performer. Even as a performer he was not just a master of the keyboard: we learn from his sons' recollections that he liked to direct a band from the first violin desk, having studied the violin to an equal level in his youth, as was apparently common (1). One of Bach's principal inspirers, Johann Fischer, had done this, and even Mozart's education was to follow the same plan. If this versatility was common in Bach's time, today his best-known piece is probably the Toccata and Fugue in D minor: possibly a spurious work, but one which focusses on him as an organist. This role was how he first acquired so many admirers, and kept gaining more throughout his life: unlike the other keyboards at his disposal (harpsichord, clavichord, tangent piano, *lautenwerk*, and others), the organ was essentially and uniquely a public instrument. But as a keyboard player, he had to be as versatile as the variety of instruments demanded. There are reasons to distrust the later assertion of his biographer Forkel that his favourite instrument to play was the clavichord, but he played and taught at least organ and harpsichord to the most rigorous standards (2). He attracted students, many from a distance, and only the most talented were accepted. Incidentally, we should note that like so many musicians then and now, he needed to supplement his income in this way.

### Composing at home

This down-to-earth description does not undermine Bach's uniqueness. Nevertheless, we cannot really talk of 'Bach's keyboard style'. Although it is generally easy to recognise a work as being by him, he employed a variety of styles, which arose from influences upon a composition (French court harpsichord music, for example, or Italian orchestral works), and also from the instrument which was in his mind at the time. It is appropriate to use the phrase 'in his mind': Bach's pupil Gerber is responsible for a report that Bach composed Book One of The Well-tempered Clavier without access to a keyboard at all (he was in prison at the time, following the acrimonious end of his employment at Weimar) (3). This anecdote, true or not, reinforces Forkel's description of Bach's teaching (which he had from his friend C. P. E. Bach, Johann Sebastian's second son): his first principle when creating music seems to have been to compose entirely in the head before trying anything at a keyboard. How astonishing, when counterpoint in at least four parts was often involved (4).

In general, then, we can picture Bach at a keyboard, giving the final polish and a practical realisation to a work which he had largely worked out mentally. This stage would have been most convenient for him at home, sitting often at a pedal harpsichord, where both organ and harpsichord works could be tested (5). It is easy to forget the practical reasons for an organist of Bach's time to use a practice instrument at home: organs resided in churches which were often freezing cold, and an assistant had

to be coerced or paid to work the bellows. Further, it would be natural for him to produce material for a domestic instrument which carried in it, ideas for which an organ might have been the ideal medium.

Bach designated some organ works *manualiter* (for keyboards alone), whereas the majority of his organ works require a pedalboard. The heading *manualiter* itself implies that this is an organ piece. We can also note that Bach wrote down some organ works requiring pedals – even important ones – on just two staves: the E flat prelude which begins *Clavierübung III*, for example. As for works not primarily intended for the organ, these can often look like organ music on the page, and also sound rather like it, both in their musical formulae, and in the presence of long pedal-points – notes sometimes lasting several bars – which seem to be crying out for the infinite sustain which the organ provides. When played on a different instrument, such long tied notes may have to be re-struck at the player's discretion, to avoid a lack of support from the bass. Surely, Bach did not expect these notes to be heard only in the performer's head? Yet we do often hear this approach from pianists and harpsichordists today, many of whom were trained to approach a score more literally than Bach might have expected.

### **Instruments and Counterpoint**

Fugues and other contrapuntal creations were Bach's obsession, and unlike other composers (particularly those beyond the borders of Germany) he often chose not to make a clear division between the type of music intended for performance at home, and that composed for church use – nor, indeed, between that intended for the organ and that for the harpsichord. Both types of instrument work well for counterpoint: the organ due to its ability to make notes continue as long as the player may wish, and the harpsichord due to its reasonably long sustain, and extremely clear presentation of each note. Some have suggested that when Bach composed the Well-tempered Clavier, the term *Klavier* referred to keyboard instruments other than the organ. This idea can, I think, be dismissed: if anything, it could be argued that the work was intended for the organ, but other instruments could play it too. Some organists have sought to prove this: at least five organ recordings of the work presently exist. In any case, it may be more accurate to follow David Schulenberg's suggestion, that Bach's title referred to the Keyboard itself – the keys which players had in front of them, and, in particular, new ways of tuning to suit a greater number of tonalities (6). These keys could belong to any keyboard instrument, but experimenting with different tuning systems could only really be done at home.

Many if not most of the pieces within the Well-tempered Clavier work excellently on the organ, and one, the A minor fugue of Book One, BWV 865, cannot be fully played without either a pedalboard or a second player (as was the method adopted for my own recording of the piece). A similar passage ends the very first fugue, in C major, but this can be played with hands alone. I have long felt that many pieces reflect Bach's use of a pedal harpsichord (more likely, in my view, than a pedal clavichord, where clarity is harder to achieve and sustain is even less), when creating music at home. Like his friend, the organist and harpsichordist Georg Böhm, he composed a number of works which can be played almost entirely on keyboard alone, but which may require pedal notes at their conclusion, as in BWV 865 (7). Even when not composing music specifically for organ, his careful determination to write the teaching pieces of the Well-tempered Clavier in such a manner as to make a pedalboard unnecessary, seems to have wavered on occasion.

Even when pedals are not essential, a number of the preludes (and indeed, the fugues) look very like organ music, and many contain sustained pedal-points. Froberger had been a composer/performer working a half-century earlier, whose music was in Bach's collection, and for whom the distinction between keyboard styles and techniques was often blurred in this way. Like his contemporary Weckmann, Froberger's contrapuntal works make some use of a short-octave bass to allow low bass notes to be conveniently played, but he was clearly a keyboardist who had no need of a pedalboard. Moving towards Bach's own day, I can find no non-organ work by Bach's predecessors Pachelbel and Kuhnau which cannot be easily played on a short octave instrument. Johann Reincken's well-known Toccata comes closer to Bach's practice, since although it, too, is playable on a short-octave harpsichord, several chords held over two long bars, make the organ a preferable medium (8). By Bach's maturity, short-octave keyboards were obsolescent, being mostly confined to small clavichords. In all cases, though, performance of these works was most convenient using a pedalboard.

Bach's preludes seem to owe their more immediate inspiration to the preludes of J. C. F. Fischer, both in the harpsichord suites of 1698, *Blümen-Buchlein*, and in the preludes and fugues of *Ariadne Musica*. In the latter work, the organ was the intended instrument, and a pedalboard was a necessity for most, but not all of the pieces. Most harpsichords did not have pedals; Bach certainly had at least one which did, but his consideration was for those students and other players who did not (9).

### The persistence of 'Organ Style'.

To pursue this idea, here are the first lines of two preludes by Fischer:

**Example 1** J. C. F. Fischer: Suite 1 (*Blümen Buchlein* 1698) Praeludium. Bars 1-3



**Example 2** Fischer: Suite 5 (ditto) Praeludium. Bars 1 – 3



Fischer was still choose to introduce a suite in this manner 40 years later: the prelude to the 1738 suite titled Melpomene, begins with a bass A tied for 4 entire bars. (Of course, we don't know when this was composed.) We do not tend to hear these works on the organ, but it is easy to imagine hearing the bass notes which underlie both of these openings, played on that instrument – perhaps on the pedals.

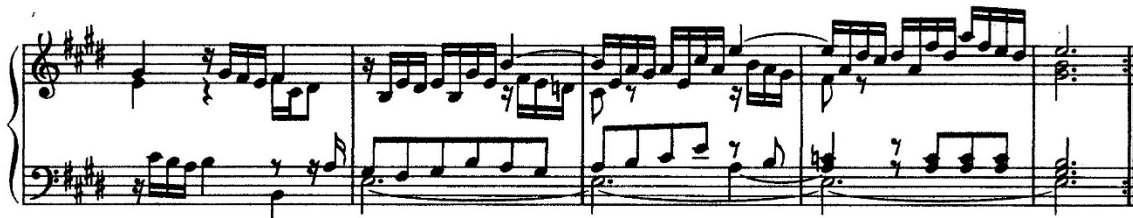
The E major preludes of Bach's Well-tempered Clavier Books One and Two, both contain a pedal-point lasting over two bars. From this and other examples, the influence of Fischer's style is clear:

**Example 3** WTC Book II, E major prelude, bars 1 – 4



We tend to think that Bach was meticulous, and liked to ‘cover all the corners’. Accordingly, it might be significant that a good harpsichord makes the opening bass note just audible to the very end of its written length: many preludes in Book One contain similar notes, held over one and a half bars, allowing them to work on the harpsichord without compromise. On the other hand, the same cannot be said for the end of the Book Two E major prelude, which has a pedal-point lasting four whole bars. Nor the E flat major and F minor preludes, in which bass notes occur which last three and four whole bars respectively. Re-striking the bass notes seems like an act of obligation rather than real musicality – unless they are being played on the organ, and simply held down.

**Example 4** WTC Book II, E major prelude, bars 50 – 54

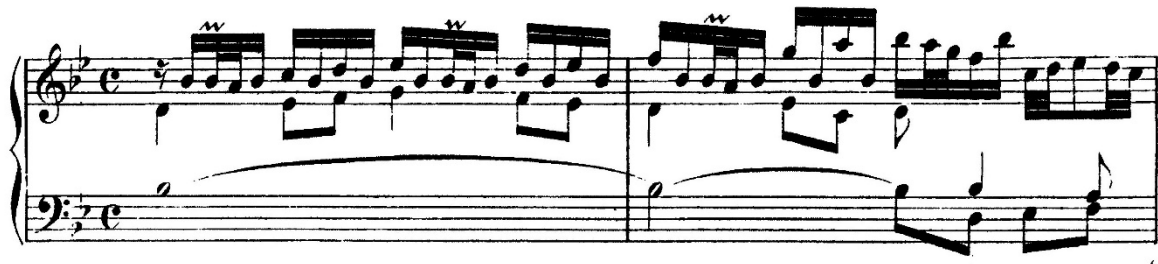


Readers may easily find other examples for themselves. Numerous pieces by Bach beyond the confines of the Well-tempered Clavier display a similar character. For example, the long B minor fugue on a theme of Albinoni BWV 951 has, towards its end, a pedal-point on F sharp, lasting three and a half bars; this composition is a revision by Bach of a shorter work, and it carefully caters for manuals-only performance. The fugue in A major BWV 949 ends with a similar bass E lasting two and a half bars, but in this case, pedals are essential. It is easy to imagine Bach sitting at his pedal harpsichord when devising pieces like this, and instinctively putting a foot down towards the end of the piece – and perhaps elsewhere. Sometimes he rewrote the passage; sometimes not.

### **Pedal-points – elsewhere**

Bass notes may imply pedals, but we have seen that they were not always required. A striking example of Bach carrying this tendency into very different music, has to be the first few bars of the prelude to his first Partita. Nothing like it appears elsewhere in the collection. It almost seems as if the composer was making a light-hearted – or in any case significant reference to his organist reputation. But this is still a prelude; it is also possible to find Bach introducing pedal-points (in the strict use of the term: sustained bass notes) into his mature dance movements, as we shall see later.

**Example 5** Partita I BWV 825, Praeludium, bars 1 - 2



Of course, not only is Baroque music bass-driven, but lower notes on a harpsichord sustain longer than high notes, so support from the bass was a natural feature of music for the plucked instrument. This kind of support was central to organ music too. On the other hand, Bach did not restrict his use of sustained notes of this kind, to a supportive bass. On a few occasions the pedal-point could be transferred to an upper note, being held down conveniently on the organ, or re-struck on the harpsichord:

**Example 6** WTC Book I, E minor prelude, bars 21-22



**Example 7** WTC Book II, B flat minor prelude, bars 73 – 78



Bach tied all these notes in his scores, expecting them to be held down when played on an organ, but presumably re-struck on other instruments. Of course, a student studying such a work with a view to later performance on the organ, might have been excused an absence of re-striking.

It used to be sometimes asserted that trills were used extensively in harpsichord playing, due to the instrument's short sustain. This can be easily disproved on a good instrument, but some passages of simple, two-part writing caused Bach to indicate trills for this purpose. They can, of course, be played in a variety of ways, and they make good music in the following busy, lively context: they are not there just to compensate. Even so, on the organ these trills may sound fussy, and might be omitted:

**Example 8** WTC Book II, E minor prelude, bars 29 – 33



There are also numerous instances where an inner part contains notes which cannot be heard for more than a short part of their duration on the page, unless the organ is being used, as here:

**Example 9** WTC Book I, Fugue C sharp minor, bars 43 – 47



**Was Bach unusual?**

The Well-tempered Clavier contains a wealth of different styles, and so offers a satisfactory basis for this kind of investigation, but also for comparison of Bach's technique with that of his contemporaries. Is the central proposal of this essay made less relevant by a look at the music of other composers? In fact, a brief survey of harpsichord music by Bach's leading contemporaries in other countries reveals hardly any use of this kind of prolonged note, either below the music or within the contrapuntal texture (10).

For instance, although he was a noted organist and organ composer, Francois Couperin can be taken as an example of a 'pure' harpsichord composer. His organ works use pedals some of the time, but I have found no harpsichord piece in which the absence of pedals produces awkwardness. Handel published six 'Grand' Fugues, but in England pedalboards did not exist: their frequent substitute was an extended bass compass to the keyboards, and octave doubling was expected at certain points, if the instrument had this facility. Large harpsichords of the time also went down to GG or FF, so the same applied. Scarlatti wrote five impressive fugues, but was clearly writing without reference to a pedalboard. His fugues sometimes end with a grand succession of octaves in the bass. But the notes are always repeated, strongly suggesting that the intended instrument was a harpsichord:

**Example 10** Scarlatti: Fugue in C minor, bars 56 to 58



It is a little easier to find parallels to Bach's practice in the works of other German composers, and in particular, in music by those whose principal concern was the organ. While Dietrich Buxtehude seems to have observed a distinction between organ and harpsichord, passages like the following example by Krieger are telling. In the context of what we know about organ music in German churches, it is rather unlikely that dance suites were considered acceptable there.

**Example 11** Krieger (1697): Partita in A major. Allemande, bar 4ff (undefined bars)



It is instructive to examine Bach's dance pieces in the light of Example 11. Perhaps Bach – or his publisher – while recognising the huge achievement of the Partitas in epitomising the German and Bach's own approach to the conventional dances, also felt that their difficulty, which was commented on in Bach's lifetime, should not be additionally impenetrable through excessive use of counterpoint. Partita II, for example, begins with a dense *grave*, but all but one of the following movements are virtually in two parts. The courante, however, contains the kind of contrapuntal detail and pedal-points which would have astonished a French contemporary.

**Example 12** Bach: Partita II in C minor BWV 826, Courante, bars 7 - 10



A more obvious parallel to Example 11 is the allemande of Bach's Partita IV. No-one would ever question the quality of this as idiomatic keyboard music, but in my view, only an organist could have composed these pieces.

**Example 13** Bach: Partita IV in D major BWV 828, Allemande, bars 13 – 15



Readers who wish to explore this further are invited, not just to observe all those pedal-points, but to consider Bach's use of notation of note-length in the C major prelude of Well-tempered Clavier Book I, which I have discussed elsewhere. This is one of Bach's best-known pieces, and one which demands a very different approach from the player, depending on which instrument is used. (11).

To conclude:

In the time of J. S. Bach, the tradition of instrumental flexibility in keyboard music was still alive, but waning. It was most clearly still active in the music of German organist / harpsichordists.

Bach, although a master of different instrumental styles, sometimes wrote and thought as an organist, even when this was not the intended, or at least the most convenient instrument for performance. As a teacher he aimed to produce good all-round keyboardists, but the organ was Bach's own main instrument for most of his life, and was very likely to offer future employment to many of those whom he taught. Francis Knights has suggested that actual opportunities for organ-playing may have been restricted to Bach's more advanced students, and this would reinforce the need for the teacher to develop a pupil's technique elsewhere (12).

Bach required his students to make their own copy of the Well-tempered Clavier to assimilate and to work from. For performance of music for which the organ was the ideal medium, he would have expected them to use an organ if the opportunity arose. When playing another instrument, their technique faced additional challenges: in much of Bach's counterpoint they would have to hold down notes after they had become inaudible, and compromise the performance of those pedal-points by re-striking, if a satisfying musical performance was desired. This was not a unique demand of Bach's, but one which he made to an unusual degree.

Doubtless, Bach also encouraged his students to enjoy the expressive qualities of both, indeed of all kinds of keyboard instrument. His advanced dance pieces demonstrate his use of organ style in a genre ill-suited to organ performance, while the abstract music of the Well-tempered Clavier has, ever since its wide dissemination, transcended the compromises which performers may have to make, allowing it to appeal to all keyboard players.

*This article expands ideas within the booklet notes for Bach at Home – Keyboard Pieces SBCD 223*

## Notes

- (1) C. P. E. Bach to Forkel BDIII, no.801.
- (2) Forkel had a central stake in a clavichord-making firm, while J. S. Bach left no clavichords among the possessions inventoried after his death. Although this may be disputed, I find few if any keyboard works by Bach which bear a clear stamp of being written deliberately to exploit the expressive capabilities of the clavichord.
- (3) Ernst Ludwig Gerber received this anecdote from Bach's pupil, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, and passed it on to Forkel. As late as 1790, Ernst Gerber referred to this: BD III, no.948.
- (4) Forkel: Bach's Life, Genius, and Works, Chapter VII. C. P. E. Bach to Forkel, January 13<sup>th</sup> 1775. The Bach Reader (1), p. 278.
- (5) No pedal harpsichord survives. A description of one by Bach's pupils Jacob Adlung has contributed to a large number of reconstructions by modern makers. These vary greatly, but



have proved on recordings to be musically very successful. Several original pedal clavichords, however, exist in collections, including the Musical Instrument Museum, Leipzig. As practice instruments they function well, and will have been less expensive for the average organist to buy. None are preserved which were made in Bach's lifetime.

(6) David Schulenberg: *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach*. Schirmer, 1992. P.162.

(7) For example:

Böhm: Aus tiefer Not.. – Verse 1 *manualiter*, Verse 2 with pedals.  
Freu dich sehr.. – Partitas 1 – 11 *manualiter*, Partita 12 with pedals.  
Capriccio in D – last line actually playable without.

Bach: a very similar Capriccio in E BWV993. Almost entirely just playable *manualiter*.

(8) J. A. Reincken: Toccata. No. 12 in Breitkopf edition, 8290.

(9) The inventory of Bach's instruments compiled after his death, mentions that he left instruments to his son Johann Christian, including a set of pedals. This might have been a separate instrument, or a set of pedals for use with 'pull-down' strings. The latter were common in Italy, but we have no surviving examples in Germany, where the pedal component of an organ was taken much more seriously.

(10) A few instances can be found, of unduly sustained notes in works intended for the harpsichord, which seem to be there almost by accident, rather than reflecting a connection to organ music or performance. On most harpsichords, these must either be left to resonate as long as the instrument is capable, or re-struck. See, for example:

Handel: 'Great' Suite 5 in E major. Allemande, bars 14 – 16.  
D'Anglebert: Tombeau de Mr. de Chambonnières, bars 23 – 24. Perhaps significantly, D'Anglebert wrote five organ fugues, four of which require bass pedal-points over the final few bars.

(11) Colin Booth: Bach's most-played piece: Prelude One of the Well-tempered Clavier - in context. The Consort, June 2020 and available at [www.colinbooth.co.uk/articles](http://www.colinbooth.co.uk/articles). The notation of the arpeggiated chords which form this prelude, and the way in which Bach altered the notation over time, strongly reflects the ambivalent thought of an organist.

(12) Francis Knights: Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* as an organ tutor. National Early Music Association Newsletter vii/1 (Spring 2023)

### Further reading

An analysis has been made by Francis Knights, of 'problem pieces' by Bach which require a pedalboard for full performance, but which were probably non-organ compositions. This article also expands some matters touched on in the present essay, and examines in detail other linked questions, such as the technical feasibility of the use of certain instruments for certain works.

Francis Knights: Bach's pedal clavier: eight problem works. RCO The Journal 2020.

**Colin Booth** combined the careers of harpsichordist and instrument-maker for most of his working life. As player, he has performed as soloist and continuo harpsichordist in a number of countries, from Denmark to South Africa and from Ireland to the USA. He taught and played annually for 25

years at the Dartington International Summer School, and has recorded 21 CDs of solo harpsichord music.

Colin's recordings of music by Bach have all received fulsome praise. They began in 1993 with *J. S. Bach – by Arrangement*. Following a widely praised CD of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in 2010, he released a 4-CD recording of the *Well-tempered Clavier* in 2018 -2019.

His latest recording is *Bach at Home – Keyboard Music* SBCD 223.

Information about all aspects of Colin's work can be found at [www.colinbooth.co.uk](http://www.colinbooth.co.uk)