The keyboard music of Johann Kuhnau: an interpretive minefield or an oddly neglected treasure? A performer's Introduction.

A few years ago I recorded the eight suites of 1698 by J. C. F. Fischer. Here was first-class music: Fischer was one of several fine composers who provided inspiration and even musical material, for a slightly younger J. S. Bach. I had previously recorded music by another, better-known composer in this group: Dietrich Buxtehude. To my shame, I only recently came to pay proper attention to Johann Kuhnau. I then discovered a composer of at least equal stature to these two. Like Fischer, Kuhnau published his keyboard music, and issued it through several corrected editions which are easy to source today. Why, I wondered, was this music so neglected in our own time?

Most German Baroque composers used ornament signs within their scores sparingly, if at all. Today's performers, faced with a piece of German Baroque music, are uncertain about how heavily to decorate their playing of it, and most err on the side of caution. To many modern ears, it can even sound adequate undecorated. As to which ornaments to apply, most will tend to follow a 20th century tradition based on the precepts of J. S. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, set down in 1753. Johann Kuhnau was two generations older than C. P. E. Bach, and gave unusually prolific – and rather different indications of ornamentation, which may suggest a different kind of performance from what we are used to. This essay will briefly examine Kuhnau's keyboard style, and focus on his use of ornaments. Since he was Bach's predecessor, we can then ask how linked the keyboard practices of these two composers may have been.

Johann Kuhnau (1660 - 1722) is known today as Kantor at Leipzig immediately before Bach, and as the composer of a set of pioneering keyboard pieces on biblical themes: the six Biblical Sonatas. Kuhnau was no insignificant precursor of a great master, but an unusual and remarkable man. Well-known in his day as a polymath, with serious interests in Hebrew, Greek, and Mathematics, he trained and actually practised as a lawyer. He made German translations of foreign material, wrote on music theory, and published novels, including several popular satirical works. One, *The Musical Charlatan*, poked fun at the music and musicians of his time, and provides a witty insight into how music functioned around the turn of the 18th century. All these accomplishments were in addition to his duties at Leipzig, where he had achieved the post of organist at the *Thomaskirche* at the age of 24, moving on later to become Kantor. Like J. S. Bach, he had important pupils, who included Telemann and Fasch. On the other hand, he had similar difficulties with the Town Council to those experienced by Bach, and according to Mattheson's biographical note, it was a combination of these with fractious relationships with other leading musicians, including the younger Telemann, which contributed to prolonged ill-health, and ultimately to his death, aged 62.

Some of Kuhnau's church and operatic music (most of which is sadly lost) is being re-discovered and performed. There is real quality present, and until recently some examples were attributed to Bach: the stylistic similarities are clear. His present-day reputation as composer rests mainly on his last keyboard publication, the Biblical Sonatas. These pioneering works of what we may call 'programme music' were sectional, and depicted Old-Testament stories. Kuhnau supplied each one with a descriptive preface to clarify the content of the various movements.

These six sonatas were Kuhnau's final keyboard publication: three earlier books had already achieved several re-issues. His reputation was high: someone with a deep grounding in French and Italian music, but who was a fine German stylist with a strong personality. Although pieces from the third volume (multi-movement sonatas in the Italian style) have been recorded, no recording yet exists of the first two books, containing, almost entirely, sets of suites. Considering their quality, this is surprising, and something which I hope to remedy. The reasons for this neglect may lie in three

areas: the first set is entirely in major keys, the second in minor keys, making it rather difficult to arrange a programme – and these two books as a whole, would take more than three hours to play. The dance-pieces depend to a degree (which Kuhnau only hints at in his preface) on rhythmic conventions, which are still imperfectly understood. Thirdly, there are problems associated with the main focus of this essay: Kuhnau's ornamentation.

Ornaments in Kuhnau's keyboard music.

Unlike French masters of the period (in particular D'Anglebert and François Couperin) most German composers' ornaments seem sparse, and almost casually applied. Kuhnau's first two books invite comparison with the first set of suites published by his contemporary J. C. F. Fischer, at almost the same time. Both composers began each suite with an elaborate prelude, most being in an organistic, German idiom. Fischer's preludes, as presented, contain a few short trills, and the dances (in a consciously French style), many more ornaments, all indicated by the same sign. We can assume that he intended these to be performed in a variety of ways. Kuhnau, on the other hand, had his own approach to indicating ornaments. In his first volume, he indicated unusually copious but inconsistent ornamentation, but progressively fewer signs appear in his subsequent publications. He used several different signs, in a careful manner. For the later books he provided largely plain scores, and directed that his earlier ornamental stipulations should be a guide to their performance. There was to be no distinction between radically different styles of music: the same kind of ornamentation was equally appropriate to French-influenced dance movements, and to Italianate sonatas. Some of Kuhnau's ornaments equate with, and are indicated by signs akin to those of his French contemporaries. Others do not, having a closer relationship to English practice of his contemporaries Blow, Purcell, and Croft. Kuhnau's prescriptions are both helpful (their prolific nature is unusual and suggestive of an interesting performance style), and troublesome (his explanations were unclear, and to some extent remain so). In addition, we must ask: did Kuhnau (as Couperin did) expect all the ornament signs to be acted upon, or could they be played selectively? The examples presented later will show why this has to remain uncertain, particularly in lively music.

20th century caution

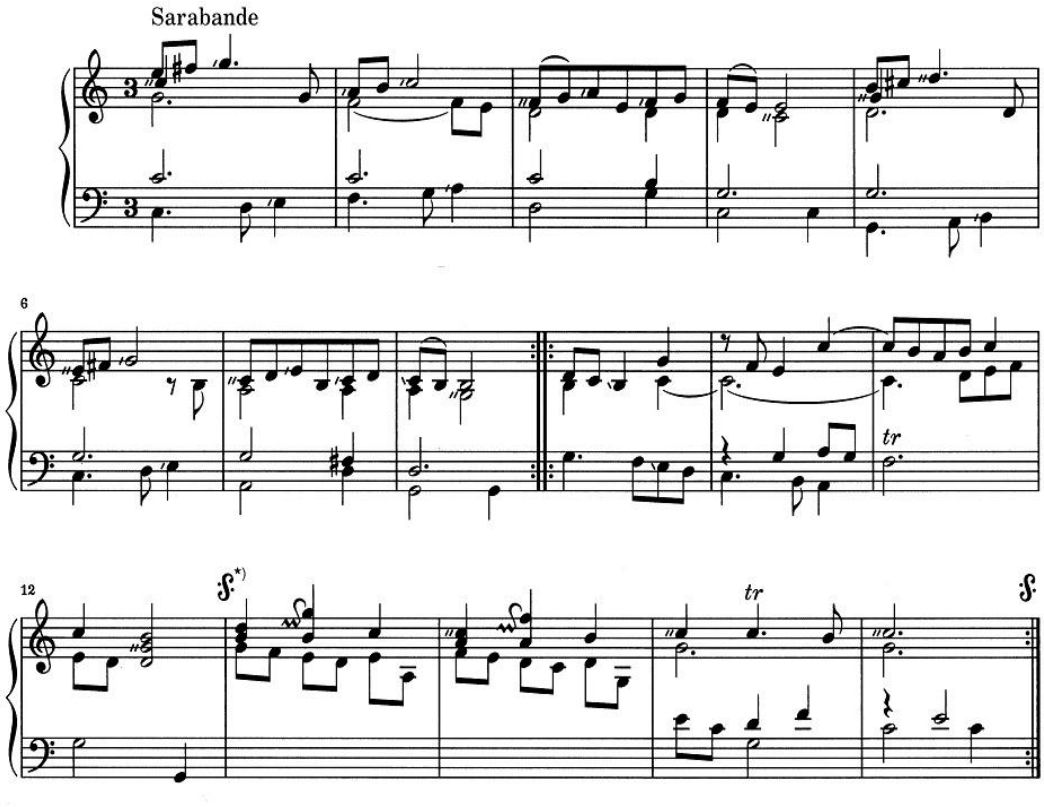
Gustav Leonhardt's use of ornaments when recording the Biblical Sonatas in 1970 was cautious: he largely ignored Kuhnau's directions, but was at that time not alone. Kuhnau's instructions about the execution of some of his ornaments were confusing, which led to a great deal of questionable elaboration by editors. The Breitkopf edition, first published in 1901 and re-issued in 1958, included three whole pages of suggested realisations of just the single-note ornament, dependent on varying musical contexts.

Through the 19th century the tendency had developed, of treating (and indicating) most single-note ornaments as 'grace notes' (that is, as short notes to be played before the note to which they were applied, rather than 'on the beat'). The editors of the Breitkopf edition conscientiously wished to re-examine this, as had Edward Dannreuther, whose survey 'Musical ornamentation' had been published in England after the pianist and scholar had moved there in 1871. As far as J. S. Bach's music was concerned, the gradual reversal of ornamental practice which ensued, saw its ultimate expression in Ralph Kirkpatrick's 1935/8 edition of the Goldberg Variations. His approach became the 'go-to' method of ornamentation, not just for that work but for Bach's music in general, for the rest of the twentieth century, and remains deeply influential in our own time. It depends on a very anti-romantic metrical subdivision of note values, and is the antithesis of spontaneous. In the Broude Brothers 1953 edition of the Biblical Sonatas, Kurt Stone remained mostly faithful to the more modern 'proportionate' approach when discussing the single-note ornament, and to a lesser extent

the same caution is demonstrated in the most recent edition from Henle, published in 2014. Until recently, there was a desire for each ornament sign to have a specific meaning which should be clarified as far as possible. We now know that the signs were often used more flexibly and spontaneously. At the same time, the universal reverence for J. S. Bach had meant that his predecessor Kuhnau's musical intentions were deemed particularly worthy of notice in 1901, even if his music was seldom performed – and the Breitkopf edition analysed them to an extreme degree.

Kuhnau's 'Keyboard practice' (*Neuer Clavier Űbung*).

In the light of the directions given in his prefaces, that his early publications should act as models for ornamentation of his later works, Kuhnau's very first suite of 1689 can provide ideal material for study. The examples use the recent Henle edition of 2014.



Example 1: Book 1, Suite 1 in C major. Sarabande

This little piece contains all of the ornament signs used most generally by Kuhnau, and allows us to assess their use in music to be played at a moderate speed. Bach's sarabandes within the 'French Suites' in general call for a similar tempo to this example by Kuhnau. The meaning of three of the ornaments is readily accepted, partly by noting where Kuhnau's own instructions are clear, and also by extrapolating from clear contemporary parallels:

1) **The (upward) slide** (give sign reproduction)

This occurs twice, in bars 13 and 14. There are several permissible performance possibilities:

a) A simple *schleifer* (slide) over three notes, the first note being played on the beat.
b) The same, but with the beat occurring on the written note, in these cases, g and f.
c) It is possible to play either of these combined with a short trill.

The player could choose the version, and indeed the speed of execution and elaboration. Elsewhere Kuhnau sometimes reverses the direction of this ornament, using a modified sign.

2) **The mordent** (give sign reproduction)

This occurs more frequently. Kuhnau uses it on strong beats, to add emphasis. In bars 4, 5, and 8, the emphasis is transferred to the second principal beat. The number of repercussions can vary from a simple single one, to several, dependent on the length of the written note, and the degree of emphasis deemed appropriate.

3) The trill

This occurs in bars 11 and 15. Played from above the written note, it should usually incorporate a leading note, whose length and position are not specified. Nor is the length of the trill specified.

4) The slur

There is little doubt that Kuhnau's normal articulation would have been sufficiently clear as to very slightly separate most notes *. This is hard for some of today's players to come to terms with: for those inheriting several centuries of changing keyboard practice, a selective 'smoothing' of a line, will allow a greater degree of elegance and expression. Slurs over pairs of notes (bars 3, 4, and 8) can be interpreted as 'modern' slurs – so long as a normal level of very slight detachment is applied elsewhere. In other words, the two slurred notes are played legato, isolating them from surrounding material. However, if the piece is played generally with some selective legato, the written slurs become meaningless.

On the other hand, it is possible that the slur may indicate a gentle reverse inequality. This is common French practice for the period, indicated in the same way, is used by Kuhnau frequently over paired notes, and can be found in a number of Bach's keyboard pieces **.

5) **The single-note ornament** (give sign reproductions)

Sometimes a little subtlety and style in the use of Accents *…. which the listener hardly notices, can take one, two, up to three years to learn correctly…*

Kuhnau*: 'The Musical Charlatan'* 1700 p.251

Although Accents *are considered very ordinary, and are the kind of ornaments which must be executed so very softly and gently that they are hardly audible, nevertheless they contribute to a musical work a significant grace, and require daily listening to a master (as teacher) ...*

Johann Walther: *Precepts of Musical Composition,* Weimar 1708 section 6.

These comments offer a significant introduction to a discussion of this type of ornament. Kuhnau used it far more frequently than any other sign, calling it *accent (Accentus)* a term first used by Praetorius in 1619, and subsequently by many German composers. Bach used the name in his short ornament table provided for his young son Wilhelm Friedemann.

*For an examination of touch and note-length, See Booth: *Did Bach really Mean That*? Chapter 2.

** See, for example, WTC Book II, prelude in D major, *passim*. WTC II, prelude in A flat major, bar 62.

The authorities note that when the slanting sign is shown ascending, it rises, and when descending, it moves in the opposite direction (compare bars one and nine). The English called these 'forefall' and 'backfall', and used similar short strokes to indicate them, often differently placed.

Single-note ornaments in J. S. Bach's music have for almost a century been played long and often proportionate, which is the literal implication of D'Anglebert's ornament table, on which Bach's was based. The same essential method was greatly elaborated by Bach's son C. P. E. Bach, in his *Versüch (Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments, 1753)*. There termed the appoggiatura, it takes essentially two forms: either a stressed ornament (preferably long but occasionally short), or a very short, almost on-the-note ornament, which we would now call an acciaccatura. The longer version was crucial to a musical style into which Carl Philipp's father only ventured occasionally, in the latter part of his life. Its expressive potential became so valued that Carl Philipp devoted many pages to showing where and how it ought to be used – even when not indicated at all. This tradition formed the basis for Kirkpatrick's realisations of the Goldberg Variations ornaments.

We can now see that towards the end of the seventeenth century there was a move away from a preference for grace-notes, towards a preference for appoggiaturas. Both continued to be used, but signs remained ambiguous, context determining what one should play. C. David Harris, in his examination of the *accent* and its use over time, draws attention to Johann Walther, a cousin and friend of J. S. Bach, whose treatises of 1708 and 1731 reinforce this shift in taste. Significantly, the later publication placed more emphasis on long appoggiaturas, while the earlier regarded the *accent* principally as a short, almost insignificant ornament which gracefully added weight to the (accented) note before which it is placed – in other words, a grace-note. Harris's essay is a detailed, scholarly investigation of the same matters dealt with in the current article, dealing with several of the important sources with a proper detailed attention which lies beyond the scope of this essay. In general, however, Harris reached the same conclusions. * In addition, Chapter 8 of my own book was devoted entirely to the single-note ornament, where the *accent* was similarly explained, and a later article examined it in greater depth, specifically as used by J. S. Bach. **

Returning to Example 1, we can, for the sake of completeness, isolate instances with potential for the treatment which C.P.E. Bach was to stipulate half a century later. In bars 2, 6 and 9 (two instances in both latter cases), the written note is undotted, and in theory the appoggiatura could be half its length. In bars 1 and 5 it is placed against long dotted notes. Here a metrical approach would make the appoggiatura either one third or two thirds the length of the dotted note. Choosing between these would depend upon personal taste, and due observation of any conflict with what was happening in the other parts.

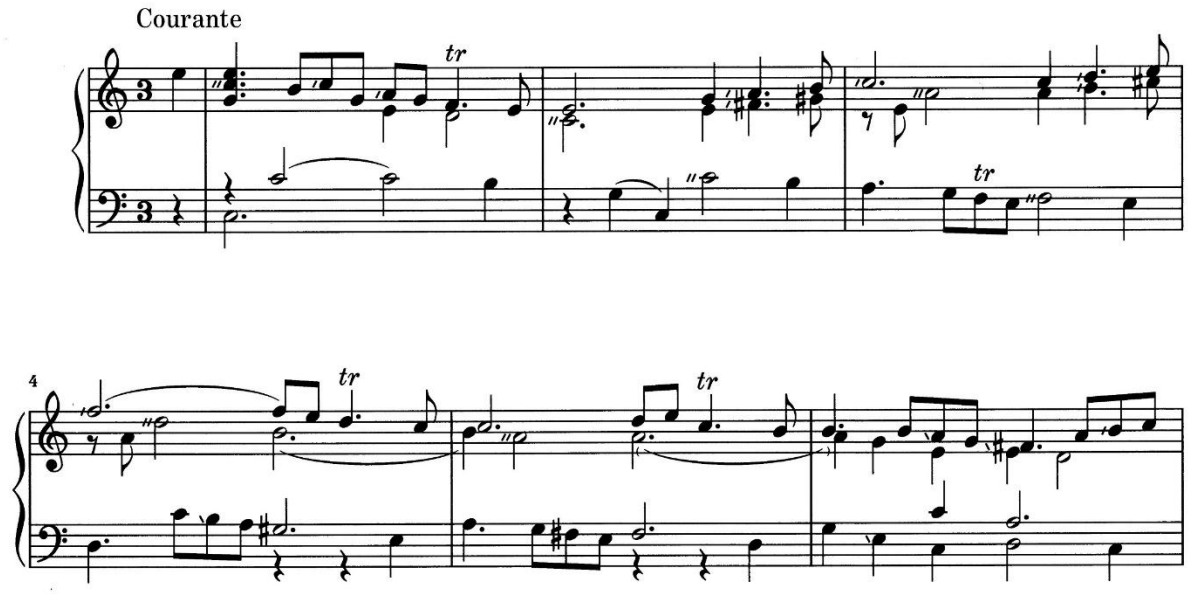
This on-the-beat proportionate approach seems to me to have rather limited suitability here. To restrict oneself to metrical appoggiaturas in such a dance-piece is both difficult and inelegant. In 2014, the editor of the new Henle edition admitted the persistent difficulty of extracting a clear message from Kuhnau's preface. Nevertheless, he commented that the composer may have been suggesting that the choice of whether these appoggiaturas should be played before or on the beat should depend on the context.

*Kuhnau's *Accentus* and its implications for the performance of Bach's keyboard music.
Harris, C David. Early Keyboard Journal; Ramsey Vol. 13, (1995): 107-120,159.
**Booth: *Did Bach Really mean That*? 2010. Chapter 8. See also
Booth: *Bach's use of the single-note ornament in the Goldberg Variations*. OUP Early Music, May 2014. Available at www.colinbooth.co.uk/articles .

The crucial thing, as Harris confirmed, is to recognise that Kuhnau, who indicated the single-note ornament far more often than any other composer, including the French, expected his sign to be flexible. To an extent, he attempted to clarify the execution by the placement of the sign: either before or after a note. Unfortunately, at least in the composer's original and amended editions, this positioning is not consistently clear. Fortunately, though, it is relatively easy to gather the intended message, and the sign preceding a note is far more common – almost the norm. It could sometimes be long, but also executed very short and ahead of the beat, with varying length, weight, and position, depending on the context. Not only was notation incapable of expressing such subtle variety: such precision would have been anathema to a German player around 1700, who, like the composer, wanted to produce a performance which felt and sounded spontaneous.

In trying to explain how this ornament should be played, Kuhnau referred to the preceding note, as it were, being played twice. In the first three bars of Example 1, we can see this happen seven times. It would be prosaic and unmusical to try to play all these ornaments to a consistent length or lengths. Some deserve more weight than others, and some can effectively be played before the beat. One simplistic suggestion would be that the two in bar 3 are the least important – perhaps the most like real 'grace-notes'. The same formula is used in bars 7 and 8.

We can also note the absence of these ornaments, from bar 10 to the end of the piece. There is a noticeable (perhaps fortuitous) parallel with the sarabande (*Aria*) with which Bach begins the Goldberg Variations: there is a similar relaxation of tension, and reduction in decoration, as the piece moves towards its conclusion. In Kuhnau's case, however, he presumably did not desire a radical reduction of decorative interest as the piece proceeded, and, in addition to his customary reinforcement of strong beats by use of the mordent, introduced *schleifers,* which may remove the need for adding unspecified grace-notes. Nevertheless, if the player chooses to add them, this is unlikely to be against Kuhnau's taste. Kuhnau directed players of his later publications to ornament their playing in accordance with the recommendations of this first book, but he was far from entirely prescriptive even there.

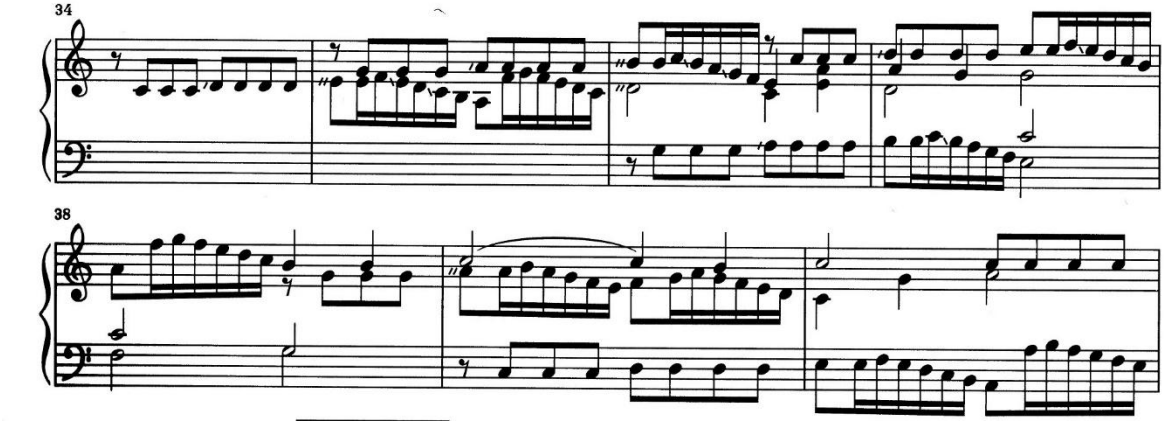


Example 2. Suite 1, Courante. Bars 1 – 6.

Moving to rather faster material, Kuhnau wrote that his courantes were in the French style, and should be played in a French manner. This firstly meant at a suitable tempo - one in which each half bar was the same tempo or a little faster than the whole bars of the Sarabande (Example 1). As for rhythm: The player may give a rhythmically 'straight' performance, or decide to play the pairs of quavers *inégal* (the level of which would be dependent upon the player's taste and ability). This would make the first of most quaver pairs subtly (perhaps even unsubtly) elongated. In either case, Kuhnau reinforced the first of each quaver pair by applying *accents*. If one returns to a 'four-square' execution, the music sounds more rigid and stiff. Some may point out that Kuhnau's courantes are simplistic: they do not, in many cases, contain the rhythmic 'beat ambiguity' which is a central element of true French courantes. Whether this should lead to a rejection of *notes inégales*, is a matter of choice.

Mordents are again placed on strong beats, but as in the sarabande, their use on second beats in bars 3 and 5 gives a subtle shift of emphasis, and supports the idea that *accents* were not intended to be stressed ornaments.

In bars 2 and 3 when used with dotted crochets, these ornaments could in theory be on the beat, and could either long or short, depending upon the player's choice. Perhaps a different length on repeat. Those applied to the first note of bars 3 and 4 have to be short – perhaps very short, to avoid clashing with the alto entry. At first sight It seems natural and elegant to play most of those which are applied to quavers, as elegant grace-notes, but a recognition of a number of dissonances (dissonance is such a crucial element of good composition in the Baroque) will encourage playing on the beat in as many instances as possible. The first beats of bars 3 and 4 are particularly significant. Real appoggiaturas, even short ones, emphasise dissonance. To pay attention to these subtleties it is important not to play this piece too fast.



Example 3. Book 1, Suite 1. Prelude, bars 34 - 40.

Many of Kuhnau's preludes are in the form of little toccatas: this is abstract contrapuntal music with no reference to dance. Again, mordents are found on some strong beats (bars 35, 36 and 39).

In this example we can examine the use of the single-note ornament in faster material. It is clear that stressed appoggiaturas, and particularly proportionate ones, while theoretically possible in some cases, are unlikely here. Grace-notes make more musical sense, adding vitality, and those applied to semiquavers have to be extremely short, unless the section is taken unnaturally slowly. The first note of each four- quaver group is accented, and to avoid any evenness in semiquaver runs, the first of each pair within them is similarly emphasised. In modern terminology, these are acciaccaturas. The effect is of far greater liveliness and spontaneity than an undecorated performance would give, but of course, this treatment is harder to play, and encourages a rather slower tempo. It is possible that this profusion of *accents* was intended to offer an extreme version, which many of Kuhnau's players may have chosen to use in a more selective manner. Perhaps what they saw on the page was Kuhnau's ideal version. In any case, after only one line of this section, he abandons a thorough indication of these ornaments. The player has to continue to use them, if only selectively, to avoid a reduction in interest and liveliness. Perhaps this is the kind of passage which caused Kuhnau to say that a really good use of his *Accentus* would take several years of practice.

These three Examples raise important questions: should one assume that the execution of single-note ornaments which was forced on the player in Example 3, was dictated by the speed and nature of the passagework, but that Kuhnau would have wanted a more considered, perhaps more 'modern' approach in slower-moving dance-pieces? Alternatively, does his acceptance of short grace-notes, so dramatically demonstrated in Example 3, suggest that he was much happier with the almost habitual use of this ornament, including in pieces such as the first two examples? A third question is equally hard to answer: did Kuhnau desire a more restricted use of ornaments in organ-playing – as his small corpus of surviving organ music might suggest? Perhaps the freedom to provide one's own decoration was assumed even more vehemently by organists, than by other keyboard players. And of course, the idea of playing numerous ornaments on the pedals sounds rather bizarre. J. S. Bach's organ scores support this, with the exception of slow-moving chorale preludes and the Trio-Sonatas, where the composer felt that his own recommendations were crucial. The engravings which accompany the editions of Kuhnau's keyboard music show a chamber

organ as one of the instruments for which the music was designed (the others are harpsichord and clavichord), but no large organ with pedals appears.

We can, however, draw these conclusions:

1) The *schleifers* and mordents employed by Kuhnau are 'normal' and easy to interpret, but no simplistic single meaning is attached to either. Speed and position, number of repercussions for mordents, and possible elaboration, all remain open to the performer's taste.
2) His use of the slur may involve meanings which go beyond the simple application of legato.
3) The single-note ornament seems to reveal a quite startling taste. Kuhnau enjoyed the effect of an astonishing number of *accents*, and expected the player to vary their length and position according to the context. He disliked a succession of undecorated notes, even fast-moving semiquavers, and was happy for grace-notes to be extremely short and virtually on or fractionally before the note.

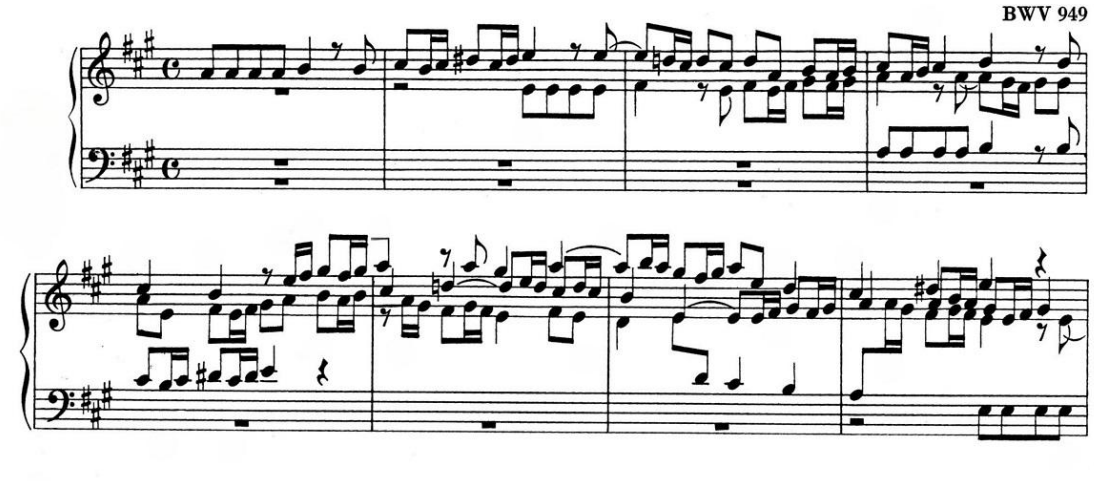
Kuhnau and Bach: a changing musical practice?

Did Kuhnau's extensive use of the *accent* indicate that he was old-fashioned, or even eccentric? Alternatively, did it actually concur with contemporary taste? If so, he was simply indicating his intentions in more detail than was customary. He would not have published music containing elements which his purchasers would have found distasteful or odd. Walther, a contemporary of Bach, saw nothing untoward in Kuhnau's preferences. Musical styles are altered constantly, but Kuhnau's last publication was issued more than a decade after the first, and his recommendations had not changed.

A comparison with J. S. Bach's use of ornaments is very inviting, given their relationship in several respects – not least that Bach took over Kuhnau's job. Bach liked a clean, uncluttered score: he too generally left detailed ornamentation to the player. Nevertheless, some of his keyboard works hint at a more intensive use of ornamentation – in performance. Some are important early pieces: the Capriccio in E, BWV 993; the 'beloved brother' Capriccio BWV 992, and the Aria Variata BWV 989. Nor can we assume that his tendency to ornament decreased over time: on the contrary, in his personal copy of the first edition of the Goldberg Variations (published as late as 1741), he increased the already considerable number of single-note ornaments, adding new ones in 'red pen'. Bach was making his personal taste more explicit, possibly with a view to a second edition. We may conclude that Bach's playing used many more single-note ornaments than most of his scores would suggest.

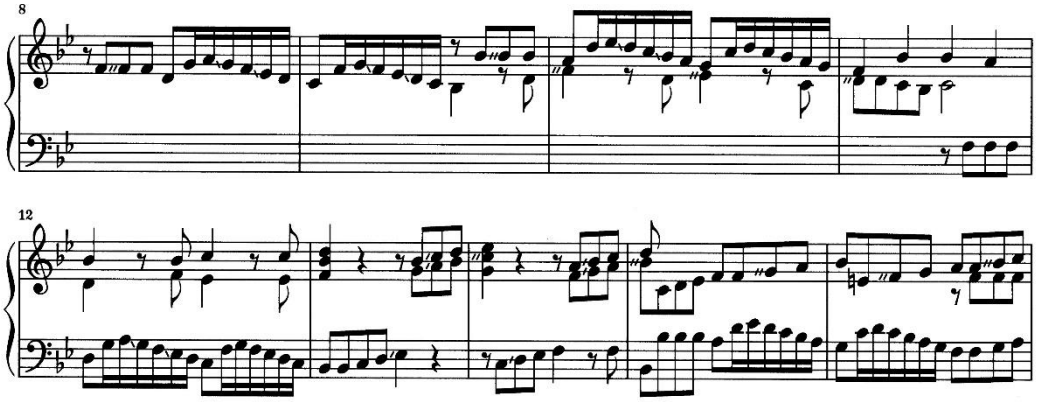
Unlike those of Walther, Bach's feelings about Kuhnau's musical technique are unknown. He knew Kuhnau personally, however: during Bach's time at Weimar they had worked together, assessing a new organ at Halle, and had together shared the town's hospitality. Given Kuhnau's erudition and lively wit, it is unlikely that the young Bach did not at least find him stimulating, even if he was twenty-five years his junior. He will certainly have acquired Kuhnau's keyboard publications, and we can easily discern strong influences within Bach's music. Given Bach's general preference for clean scores, is it possible that much of his music which at first sight seems complete to the modern eye, could be performed more idiomatically, and with greater vitality, by referring to Kuhnau's prescriptions?

Here is the opening of an early Bach fugue. The piece has a few pedal notes at its conclusion, but is playable on all kinds of keyboard. We may wonder whether Bach would have altered his level of ornamentation depending on the instrument, but it seems unlikely:



Example 4. Bach: Fugue in A major BWV 949. Bars 1 – 8.

Example 3 (above) shows Kuhnau's ornamental approach to very similar material. The indications in his first suite were not an aberration: here is an extract from the last suite of his first book:



Suite 7 in B flat major. Praeludium, bars 8 - 16:

From bar 16, *accents* disappear, and from bar 17, Kuhnau was happy to cease this level of indication almost entirely. Bach did not go in for this kind of hint or inconsistency within a piece: there are just two fugues in the Well-tempered Clavier where he does: Book II, C major and F minor, but again, single-note ornaments are absent from the score.

I have long thought that the grace-note, as understood by Kuhnau and Walther and called the *Accent*, was a far more common feature of performance in their own time – and that of J. S. Bach, than the surviving music suggests. A study of Bach's keyboard music will reveal occasional instances of the composer indicating it by a sign spontaneously (see, for example, the end of WTC Book II, Fugue in G sharp minor), and more, in a few selected works, where he did so carefully and deliberately (Goldberg Variations). Both can be used to suggest that Bach would spontaneously have added grace and liveliness to his music by this means, where no signs appear in the score.

Throughout the 19th century, music's use of ornaments, not only spontaneous but deliberately composed, steadily decreased, so that from 1900 on, even organists were seldom adding them. * The strength of this largely unornamented tradition has affected the way the modern ear at first expects to hear music of an earlier age. It is worth asking whether many keyboard works of Bach may have been habitually performed for over a century now, in a manner which Bach himself would have found simplistic, unimaginative, and even stylistically juvenile.

See Booth: *Did Bach Really Mean That*? Chapter 8, p.268.

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