

STRIKING DIFFERENCES

What insights can a harpsichordist offer to pianists who love playing Bach? *Colin Booth* explains why performing on keyboards for which Bach wrote gives a clearer and often unexpectedly liberating understanding of the composer's intentions

IN THE CONTEXT OF BACH'S *Well-Tempered Clavier*, a leading pianist for whom Bach is a speciality, was recently heard to ask, 'Who could bear to hear the harpsichord for more than an hour?'

No-one dared to respond: 'How about Bach?' A gulf exists between those today who love Bach's music played on the piano, and the sound-world of the composer himself. For me, a lover of all kinds of keyboard instrument, it's important to try to bridge this gap.

In the 21st century, we can take a piece of 18th-century music any way we like. The cellist Yo-Yo Ma commented, 'You can do just about anything to the music of Bach, and he still comes out "right side up".' A modern edition, scrubbed clean of earlier editorial suggestions, confronts the player with a lot of 'unphrased' notes. One's first reaction is simply to play these literally, but the results can be unrewarding. In the 18th century, that spare score was underpinned by a host of performance conventions, most of which have been lost. Assistance from the score, in the form of slurs, articulation marks and dynamic markings, only became common after Bach's death, under the new musical styles associated with the large clavichord and early kinds of piano. How does today's pianist, brought up to expect such assistance, deal with its absence? For a creative, confident pianist an instinctive approach may suffice. However, understanding the conventions under which Bach's score was written can solve problems, illuminating elements of this music which can be awkward or unsatisfactory. More generally, freedom from a too-literal attention to the notes on the page can make Bach's music more enjoyable – and more musical. You might



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When first approaching Bach's music, many pianists are horrified when they realise that the instruments for which he composed had no sustaining pedal. Such pianists are known generally to abjure the pedal when playing Bach, except occasionally in a very large hall. Most players can easily fill their own room with

sound, and since clarity is vital for Bach's counterpoint, the pedal is likely to be a hindrance, in which case degrees of legato – or of detachment – need to be obtained by the fingers. Ironically, I learnt this discipline early on, during piano lessons from Michael Crump, who followed the precepts of great 19th-century teachers. Keyboard authorities in the 18th century did not go to such scientific lengths when inculcating the niceties of touch, but their treatises do tell us a lot. One element, still

recommended towards the end of that century, was called 'normal touch': a clear articulation (that is, a slight detachment) of each note. By applying this as a basis, attention could be drawn to chosen elements of the music, by the introduction of, on the one hand, legato or over-holding, and on the other, actual detachment (of varying degrees, including staccato). In other words, a neutral touch was used most of the time, giving opportunities for the player to be expressive – by departing from it. This is of course derived from the use of instruments with little or no control of dynamic through touch, and is very different from the long-established tendency for pianists to play legato from habit, unless told not to – either by the score or by a teacher.

The harpsichord, then, offered means of 'expression' less overt than pianists are used to. Bach wrote music which depended on these conventions, which in turn allowed for a much simpler score than later composers were to use. In performance, this can contain hidden possibilities (see **Example 1**, below).

We could treat this as a study-piece, to develop evenness of touch and rhythm, taking the note-values either literally or with more detachment in one hand, or both. Bach created numerous teaching

pieces for his students over the years, many of which were assembled into the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. But this piece comes from his first Partita, one of a set published for the enjoyment of really good players. Bach was a keen dancer, and would have smiled at anyone treating this piece as a simple exercise: if he was conscious of this minuet as a graceful dance, how might he have expected it to be played? **Example 2** (below) provides some simplistic suggestions, for just one approach. Bach, like his contemporaries, did not prescribe a single treatment.

Firstly, let's look at the bass. Baroque music was composed from the bass first (except in the case of a fugue), and the top line was subservient to it – the reverse of what was to become the norm in the Classical period, when a Mozartian melody was far more important than its accompaniment. Bach's basses are not accompaniments, and one should avoid the kind of subdued, even staccato bass notes which some apply to them. The bass has to be rehearsed first, and treated with respect and enjoyment. This is a particularly interesting bass, and I've suggested just one way that it can be 'phrased'. A simple but naturally effective way of approaching such lines is to make conjunct notes more 'connected' than

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disjunct ones, and my suggestions follow this. Where there are no other suggestions the basic touch can be 'normal' (slightly detached), but rhythmic cohesion would encourage, albeit not slavishly, a slightly greater weight – or length – on the first bass note of bars 1-5 – but not 6 and 7.

As for the right hand, what Bach offers us on the page is only half the story. To uncover its truths, play the right hand part, omitting all notes apart from those marked by lines. This reveals how the treble line is formed from a simple harmonisation over the bass line, played on the strong beats. The other right-hand notes are decoration ➤

Example 1 | JS Bach Partita No 1 in B-flat major: Menuet I, bars 1-8 – Urtext



Example 2 | JS Bach Partita No 1 in B-flat major: Menuet I, bars 1-8 – performance suggestions



Example 3 | Bach Partita No 2 in C minor, Sinfonia, bars 1-2 – commas, slurs, and emphasis added by the author



Example 4 | JS Bach Partita No 6 in E minor: Sarabande, bars 1-2

Example 5 | JS Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book II: Fugue in F major BWV 880, bars 83-89

and linking material. The flexibility of Baroque notation means that marked notes can be played longer than written, to bring out a concealed melody. Pianists will probably find themselves emphasising these melody notes dynamically too. Some readers will be saying: 'But I do this already – it's just musical.' If so, it's good to be confident that Bach would have approved. The result is certainly not just more interesting this way, but much more beautiful, and rewarding (if rather more demanding) for the performer.

Of course, most melody lines are more obviously presented. But a similar absence of information in the score encourages a present-day musician to treat them differently from a Baroque player. A

long succession of notes can easily sound mechanical, unless the player can find structure and expression within it, which Baroque notation rarely specified.

In **Example 3** (above) the walking bass is much less busy than in Example 1, and calls for a generally neutral touch. Subtle changes of emphasis will make it more beautiful, and throw into focus the right-hand melodic line, under which the rhythmic pulse should be maintained. The melody line can be gently broken into much shorter elements than in later music, where the 'long line' might be expected. The phrasing offered here is just a suggestion. Marked notes call for a little more weight than their neighbours. The commas (which were a device introduced

into his own pieces by Bach's contemporary François Couperin), indicate the taking of mental 'breaths'. The player might imagine a wind instrument – ideally a Baroque one!

Another serious concern for a pianist is dynamics. The harpsichord offers an even, dynamic response. Despite this, Baroque composers built into their scores indications for dynamics. On Bach's instrument, two notes played together sounded louder than one, so a six or eight-part chord could be consciously used to have the effect of power. I have recordings by great pianists subverting this message by sometimes playing such chords pianissimo. Bach would have found this very odd; should pianists today do so, simply because they can? Bearing this in mind, the texture

can indicate when a piece is intentionally powerful, even in the absence of any written directions (see **Example 4**, page 37).

One additional point: this piece starts on a weak beat. If played strongly, as if it were the first beat of the bar, this would throw the rhythm of this slow dance off-balance from the start. Pianists have an advantage here. They can more easily emphasise the downbeat dynamically, while the

harpsichordist relies on articulation, and emphatically arpeggiating the downbeat chord. This technique has to be used sparingly on the piano, but it works here. Arpeggiation of chords was rarely indicated in the Baroque, but a harpsichordist was generally expected to apply it. Bach's use of texture, though, goes far beyond such simple emphasis (see **Example 5**, page 37).

Here's a dramatic crescendo: bars 83 to 85 are virtually two-part writing. On the strong beats of 86 we have first a four-note chord, then a five-note, and finally a six-note chord in 87. In later notation this would have merited a *sf* marking. Then Bach drops back to the earlier dynamic level. This may seem obvious, but it's easy for the dynamic capabilities of the piano to cause such clues to be ignored.

Example 6 | JS Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I: Fugue in D minor BWV 851, bars 38-43

Example 7 | JS Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I: Fugue in A major BWV 864, bars 50-54

One well-known Bach ‘specialist’ plays **Example 6** (opposite) with a gentle diminuendo towards the end; the piece fades away in a mood of wistful introspection. In fact, Bach meant it to feel ever more forceful into the arresting last chord. He conveyed this by the way he wrote the series of chords towards the close, adding trills on weak beats to increase the excitement. Ending keyboard pieces with strong chords was the norm for Bach, but occasionally we can see from the score that he may have wanted something different. The following ending (see **Example 7**, opposite) does indeed imply a relaxation: the descent into the low bass has the effect of a diminuendo, and even a *ritenuto* makes sense.

THESE EXAMPLES GIVE A FEW hints of what a Bach score can conceal. It’s not a matter of ‘interpretation’,

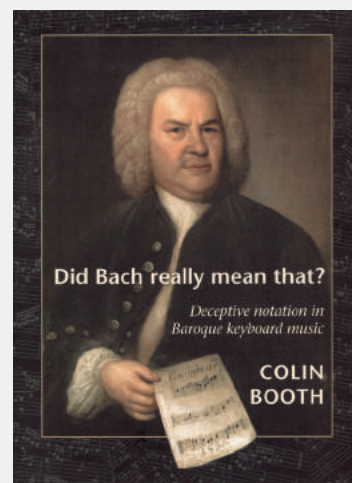
but rather, trying to discover what the composer had in mind, on the assumption that his thoughts are probably the best. In general today’s musicians are trained to ‘play the notes’, in order to show respect for

the composer. In this repertoire, a greater understanding of Baroque conventions can liberate them from this straitjacket, giving them at the same time a deeper regard for a genius such as Johann Sebastian Bach. 🎵

Harpichordist Colin Booth played and taught at Dartington International Summer School for 25 years, where one of his most popular classes was Bach for Pianists.

He has issued 13 CDs of solo harpsichord music, including Bach’s Goldberg Variations, and is currently recording the Well-Tempered Clavier.

Details of these, plus his book on the subject of notational conventions, Did Bach Really Mean That? – deceptive notation in Baroque keyboard music, are available at www.colinbooth.co.uk



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