

Rethinking J.S. Bach's
Musical Offering

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By

Anatoly Milka

Translated from Russian by Marina Ritzarev

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BD* *Bach-Dokumente*, Hrsg. v. Bach-Archiv Leipzig (Supplement zu: Johann Sebastian Bach Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke):
- BD I* *Schriftstücke von der Hand Johann Sebastian Bachs. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter; Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1963).
- BD II* *Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1685—1750. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter; Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1969).
- BD III* *Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs 1750—1800, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter; Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1972).
- BD VII* Johann Nicolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig 1802). Edition—Quellen—Materialien. Vorgelegt und erl. von Christoph Wolff. Unter Mitarb. von Michael Maul. *Bach-Dokumente*, VII (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008).
- BWV* Alfred Dürr, Yoshitake Kobayashi and Kirsten Beißwenger (eds.), *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis: Kleine Ausgabe (BWV^{2a})*, nach der von Wolfgang Schmieder vorgelegten 2. Ausgabe (Wiesbaden; Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1998).
- KB* Kritischer Bericht (Critical commentary volumes) accompanying *NBA*:
- VIII/1* Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach. Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*. Serie VIII. Band 1: *Kanons. Musikalisches Opfer* (Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1976).
- MMB* Lorenz Christoph Mizler von Kolof, *Neu eröffnete Musikalische Bibliothek oder Gründliche Nachricht, nebst unpartheyischem Urtheil von musikalischen Schrifften und Büchern*. Vols I-IV. Leipzig, 1736-1754.
- NBA* [*Neue Bach-Ausgabe*] *Johann Sebastian Bach, Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*. (Kassel, Leipzig: Bärenreiter, 1954-2008).
- NBR* *The New Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, eds. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel,

revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York, London:
W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

PREFACE

The beginning of this study goes back to my book published in Russian in Moscow, 1999. The present English version offers a continuation and fundamental revision following new findings that have surfaced over the past two decades in works by both Bach scholars worldwide and myself. Revealing new facts and studying sources in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the Bach-Archiv Leipzig, allowed me to rethink and further develop my earlier idea regarding J.S. Bach's *Musical Offering*.

I am very grateful for the help and support of the German colleagues who allowed me to work with the royal exemplar of the *Musical Offering* and Bach's manuscripts as well as other materials: Dr Helmut Hell, then director of the Music Department of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, and Frau Wera Lippoldova from the Bach-Archiv Leipzig. The discussions and consultations with Dr Hans-Joachim Schulze and Dr Peter Wollny, which I recollect with much gratitude, were also of immense help.

Making this book available to the broad English-reading audience became possible due to two colleagues who have openheartedly supported its publication. Coming from different and unexpected sources, the help was both timely and friendly: from Professor Margarita Mazo (Ohio State University), and from Professor Grigoriy Konson (Russian State Social University).

The project would not be possible without loving help from the tactful English editor Naomi Paz (Tel-Aviv) and my decades-long book designer Vladimir Schutsky (Saint Petersburg).

I am profoundly grateful to the Cambridge Scholars Publishing: first of all, to Adam Rummens, the commissioning editor, who believed in this book and made the entire process smooth and welcoming; as well as the designers Sophie Edminson and Courtney Blades, and the typesetting manager Amanda Millar who patiently and reciprocally solved the challenging tasks.

My special and immense gratitude goes to Marina Ritzarev, who initiated and implemented the project of transferring this book from twentieth-century Russia to the twenty-first-century broader world. The title "translator" in this case extends far beyond its usual meaning, including

editing and supervising the entire process of publication. While keeping to the timeframe, she consistently worked to ensure the best outcome of the book, encouraging me to introduce some of the new ideas that had surfaced after the first edition was published but had remained dormant, and also strengthening those arguments that demanded further development. This new book is the result.

The book contains fragments from my earlier articles published in the collection *Muzykal'naya kommunikatsia* (Russian Institute for Arts History, 1996) and *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* (2017, 2019), included here with the kind permission of the editors. The material for music examples belongs to the public domain. My special thanks go to Bach Digital Portal and to Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—PK, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv whose kind permission allowed me to reprint their visual materials.

Most of the English translations are quoted from the invaluable *The New Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, eds. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), while others—from German and Russian—are mine if not indicated otherwise.

Anatoly P. Milka, Saint Petersburg, April 2019

INTRODUCTION

Bach's *Musical Offering*, ever since it was found by Philipp Spitta in the 1870s in Princess Anna Amalia's library, has puzzled scholars with so many questions and riddles and caused so much bewilderment that the work has become a total enigma. Many hypotheses and conceptions have emerged in the attempt to solve it, but they have often preceded solid factual data, which demand a slow and painstaking mining in different fields of knowledge—the only approach that can and eventually does supply substantial argumentation for conceptualization.

Pessimistic as it may seem, it is hard to believe that scholars will be able to reach a comprehensive solution without an examination of the autograph of the entire work. There is indeed an autograph of the six-part Ricercar in a two-stave reduction, but its existence does not provide any new facts that could help to solve the enigma.

All that we have today is a handful of separate sheets, engraved by Johann Georg Schübler and his brothers from the Thuringian town of Zella, which comprise the only known edition from Bach's lifetime. In 1971 Christoph Wolff discovered an additional bifolio related to the edition, which appeared to be the cover of the Trio-Sonata.¹ Consequently, nineteen sheets are now at scholars' disposal.

The only circumstance that might console musicians in their search for the truth is the story of the *Musical Offering*'s creation. The story is known in detail and a rare unanimity exists among musicologists regarding the credibility of the relevant sources; indeed, total agreement. Moreover, the *Musical Offering* towers above all Bach's other compositions in being so abundantly documented. Scholars eagerly refer to these documents and recount the very familiar story of J.S. Bach's visit to the court of King Frederick II and his improvising a three-part fugue on the king's theme, while declining to improvise a six-part fugue on the same theme and promising instead to elaborate upon it at home. Whether all the details of this story are credible, or perhaps partly apocryphal, will be discussed in

¹ Christoph Wolff, "New Research on Bach's *Musical Offering*," *The Musical Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (1971): 388-90, or the revised version of the article under the same title for further references in Christoph Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 243, 249.

Part I—“Tracing the Potsdam Improvisation”. This, however, is only one example of what requires the revision and reinterpretation of the *Musical Offering*.

This book is an attempt to add one more hypothesis (to the many already existing) in respect to Bach’s original idea behind the materials that have survived to reach us today. By no means professing to provide a definitive answer to this work’s problematics, I seek only to offer a new perspective. Half of the book, Parts II—V, constitutes a kind of quadripartite form dedicated to the reconstruction of the cycle as an artistic whole and a coherent structure whose elements function in strict, complex, multilevel, and sophisticated harmony. Part III is entirely devoted to the canons known as presenting many riddles. The different functions and significance bestowed upon them by Bach, questions of titling and numbering, inscriptions, kinds of composition, location, Bach’s involvement in the preparation of their engraving—all these seemingly unrelated aspects are explored here in their interaction and interdependence.

Another half of the book, Parts VI—VIII, deals with a variety of issues regarding the contents of the *Musical Offering*. The chapters of Part VI—“Leipzig and Potsdam: Styles, Expectations, Metaphors”, consider the layer of various devices that Bach applied in the composition as references to the central event—Bach’s improvisation on the king’s theme in Potsdam. They present a mixture of styles: Bach’s own more conservative style and the new, pre-classical expression prevalent at the royal court; the authorship of the royal theme; and the hidden inscriptions. Part VII concentrates on the ricercars and offers a new conceptualization. Finally, Part VIII—“Art as Life—Life as Art: On Interpretation”, proposes a contextual view of the *Musical Offering*, which can be helpful in solving dilemmas of the contemporary performance practice. The chapters in this part also explore the typically baroque features of the composition, such as its non-linearity and its entire—musical, verbal, and graphical—text as a medium deeply charged with symbolic expressions. The chapter “Super Task” scrutinizes a sophisticated message to Bach’s royal addressee, conveying an extremely delicate balance between the earthly power of the monarch and the spiritual power of the musical genius.

PART I

TRACING THE POTSDAM IMPROVISATION

CHAPTER ONE

SOURCES

The story of Johann Sebastian Bach's visit to the Potsdam Palace and his improvising fugues upon the request of King Frederick II, on May 7, 1747, which later crystallized in one of his most famous compositions, the *Musical Offering*, was such a fabulous episode that it was to become apocryphal. It eventually found a broad reflection in both scholarly and popular literature¹ and even paved the way for the *Musical Offering* to become a part of the popular classic cultural legacy among intellectuals and scientists, as indeed reflected in Douglas Hofstadter's book.²

This very familiar story passed from book to book, from study to study, acquiring in the process the significance of an established fact. One account of the entire event has a particularly dramatic episode telling how Johann Sebastian Bach "declined" to meet the king's request during his improvisation in Potsdam. The same story recounts that, feeling it necessary nonetheless to fulfil the request, Bach followed up and created the *Musical Offering*. The originator of the story, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, tells it in detail.³ He recounts that while Bach had brilliantly improvised a three-part fugue on the theme offered by Frederick II, he had declined to improvise a six-part fugue on this theme, contending that not every theme is suitable for a six-part fugue; but he did promise to compose one later.

Hans Theodor David refers to this even more assertively: "Bach declined to improvise a six-part fugue on the same subject although he

¹ One of the more recent books featuring this episode is James R. Gaines's *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

² Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid: A metaphorical fugue in minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

³ Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: Hoffmeister und Kühnel (Bureau de Musique), 1802). The text included in *BD VII*, 9–89 and translated into English in *NBR, Part VI*. Forkel's Biography of Bach, 417-82. The episode describing Bach's visit to Potsdam is on 429-30.

seems to have been specially asked to do so”. And further: “With the Six-Part *Ricercar*, he met the challenge”.⁴

Writers, addressing this story later, have referred to Forkel’s book as if it were a primary documentary source,⁵ because, as Forkel states, it quotes Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, J.S. Bach’s eldest son⁶. No less important for the historiography was also Forkel’s statement that Wilhelm Friedemann had accompanied his father on this trip.⁷ Leaving all this aside for the time being, it is revealing to turn to those documents that preceded the publication of Forkel’s book, and to consider them in chronological order.⁸

Principal documents

1. The report in the newspaper *Spencersche Zeitung* from May 11, 1747 (*Berlinische Nachrichten von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen*

⁴ Hans Theodor David, *J.S. Bach’s Musical Offering: History, Interpretation, and Analysis* (New York: Schirmer, 1945), 134. (The book also reprinted in New York: Dover 1945, 1972, and ca 1980).

⁵ Christoph Wolff writes: “Zur Diskussion verschiedener Einzelheiten sei auf die folgenden *Dokumente* [my italics—A.M.] zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Musikalischen Opfers verweisen: ...4. Der auf eine Erzählung Wilhelm Friedemann Bachs zurückgehende Bericht von Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Bachs Leben... S. 9*” [A discussion of the different details can be found in the following *documents* (my italics—A.M.) on the history of creation of *Musical Offering... 4*. The account by Wilhelm Friedemann retold in Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Bachs Leben... p. 9*]. See Christoph Wolff, *KB VIII/1*, 102. There is, however, another view: “In Forkel’s book, Bach is not a real, historical subject but an ideal subject, a romantic hero. This is not surprising when we consider the fact that it was published in the heyday of German idealism. Later scholarship has taken this image as the starting point for discussions of Bach that I will call, with intended irony, the ‘Forkel exegesis tradition’.” See Wolfgang Hirschmann, “‘He Liked to Hear the Music of Others’: Individuality and Variety in the Works of Bach and His German Contemporaries,” in *Bach Perspectives, Vol. 9: J.S. Bach and His German Contemporaries*, ed. Andrew Talle (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 5). The following discussion in this chapter supports this view.

⁶ “William [sic!] Friedemann, who accompanied his father, told me this story.” (Forkel’s Biography of Bach, *NBR*, 429).

⁷ This statement, in all probability derived from Forkel’s words, was accepted unquestioned by various later studies.

⁸ Analyses of the documents relating to the Potsdam improvisation can be found in Hans-Joachim Schulze, “Documents,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, ed. Robin A. Leaver (Routledge, 2016), 35-6.

- No LVII, 11 Mai 1747),⁹ reprinted by other newspapers (*Leipziger Zeitungen*, *Hamburger Relationscourier*, *Magdeburger Privilegirten Zeitung*) from May 11 to 16.
2. Dedication of the *Musical Offering* to Frederick II, inscribed by J.S. Bach and published in the very first self-published edition. Bach dated it July 7, 1747.
 3. Bach's obituary, written by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach in co-authorship with Johann Friedrich Agricola in 1751 and published in the *Music Library*, edited and published by Lorenz Mizler.¹⁰

The first document, the report in *Spenersche Zeitung*, appeared on the fourth day following Bach's improvisation at Potsdam Palace:

One hears from Potsdam that last Sunday [May 7] the famous Capellmeister from Leipzig, Mr. Bach, arrived with the intention to have the pleasure of hearing the excellent Royal music at that place. In the evening, at about the time when the regular chamber music in the royal apartments usually begins, His Majesty was informed that Capellmeister Bach had arrived at Potsdam and was waiting in His Majesty's antechamber for His Majesty's most gracious permission to listen to the music. His August Self immediately gave orders that Bach be admitted, and went, at his entrance, to the so-called *Forte* and *Piano*, condescending also to play, in His Most August Person and without any preparation, a theme—for Capellmeister Bach, which he should execute in a fugue. This was done so happily by the aforementioned Capellmeister that not only His Majesty pleased to show his satisfaction thereat, but also all those present were seized with astonishment. Mr. Bach found the theme propounded to him so exceedingly beautiful that he intends to set it down on paper as a regular fugue and have it engraved on copper. On Monday, the famous man let himself be heard on the organ in the Church of the Holy Spirit at Potsdam and earned general acclaim from the listeners attending in great number. In the evening, His Majesty charged him again with the execution of a fugue, in six parts, which he accomplished just as skilfully as on the

⁹ *BD* II, no 554, 434-35.

¹⁰ From Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola, "The World-Famous Organist, Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, and Music Director in Leipzig" ["Der dritter und letzte ist der im Orgelspielen Weltberühmte HochEdle Herr Johann Sebastian Bach Königlich-Pohlnischer und Churfürstlich Sächsischer Hofcompositeur und Musikdirector in Leipzig"] (obituary), in *MMB* IV/1 (1754): 158-76. Reprinted in *BD* III, no. 666: 80-92; translated in *NBR*, 297-307.

previous occasion, to the pleasure of His Majesty and to the general admiration.¹¹

What follows from this report is that J.S. Bach had performed music at Potsdam Palace two days in a row: Sunday, May 7 and Monday, May 8, 1747. Accordingly, the sequence of events appears to have been as follows:

May 7, Sunday

1. The king, who offers the theme to Bach, first performs it himself on the *Forte* and *Piano* and suggests that Bach improvise a fugue on it.
2. Bach improvises on the king's theme.
3. The king expresses his approval and all the courtiers are amazed by Bach's virtuosity.
4. Bach (seemingly responding to compliments) praises the king's theme and announces his intention to write a "proper fugue" on this theme ("ordentlichen Fuga zu Papier") and to have it engraved.

May 8, Monday

1. Bach plays the organ in the Holy Spirit Church (for a mass audience).
2. In the evening, Bach improvises a fugue (in all probability at Potsdam Palace), according to the king's request.

It should be noted that there is no trace here of any situation in which Bach either failed to carry out any task given to him or declined to do so. This did not happen either on the first day, May 7, Sunday, or on the second—May 8, Monday. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the newspapers would have missed such a sensation and not mentioned it in any way. Moreover, according to the newspaper announcement, on the first day, May 7, Bach had improvised a fugue only once: the fugue on the royal theme.

The second document is the dedication of the *Musical Offering* to the king. This, we should recall, was written by Bach himself and dated July 7, 1747, i.e. exactly two months after the improvisation on May 7. It reads:

MOST GRACIOUS KING!

In deepest humility I dedicate to Your Majesty a musical offering, the noblest part of which derives from Your Majesty's Own August Hand. With awesome pleasure I still remember the very special royal Grace

¹¹ Report in the *Spenerische Zeitung*, Berlin, May 11, 1747 (*BD* II, no. 554, 434-35). (Translated in *NBR*, 224).

when, some time ago, during my visit in Potsdam, Your Majesty's Self deigned to play to me a theme for a fugue upon the clavier, and at the same time charged me most graciously to carry it out in Your Majesty's Most August Presence. To obey Your Majesty's command was my most humble duty. I noticed very soon, however, that, for lack of necessary preparation, the execution of the task did not fare as well as such an excellent theme demanded. I resolved therefore and promptly pledged myself to work out this right Royal theme more fully and then make it known to the world. This resolve has now been carried out as well as possible, and it has none other than this irreproachable intent, to glorify, if only in a small point, the fame of a Monarch whose greatness and power, as all the sciences of war and peace, so especially in music, everyone must admire and revere. I make bold to add this most humble request: may Your Majesty deign to dignify the present modest labor with a gracious acceptance, and continue to grant Your Majesty's Most August Royal Grace to

Your Majesty's most humble and obedient servant,

Leipzig, July 7, 1747

THE AUTHOR¹²

Note that this dedication mentions only the date May 7, when, according to the newspaper, Bach had improvised the fugue on the king's theme. The sequence of events noted here does not contradict that given in the newspaper:

1. The king, who offers the theme to Bach, plays it on the clavier and suggests that Bach improvise a fugue on it.
2. Bach improvises on the king's theme.
3. Bach comments that his fugue appears not to be worthy of the theme (he praises the king's theme) and declares that he will elaborate upon it and perfect it.

The order in which the events unfolded is the same in this document (the dedication) as in the newspaper report. Bach merely modestly omits the issue of the king's approval and the amazement of all those present.

The next document is the obituary compiled by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach together with Johann Friedrich Agricola and published in the *Musical Library* by Lorenz Mizler in 1754—over four years after Bach's death and seven years after the Potsdam improvisation. This event is described as follows:

¹² Bach's dedication to the *Musical Offering* (*BD* I, no. 173, 241-42; translated in *NBR*, 226-27).

In the year 1747 he [Bach] made a journey to Berlin and on this occasion had the opportunity of being heard in Potsdam by His Majesty the King of Prussia. His Majesty himself played him a theme for a fugue, which he at once developed, to the particular pleasure of the Monarch, on the pianoforte. Hereupon His Majesty demanded to hear a fugue with six obligato voices, which command he also fulfilled, to the astonishment of the King and the musicians there present, using a theme of his own. After his return to Leipzig, he set down on paper a three-voiced and six-voiced so-called *ricercar* together with several other intricate little pieces, all on the very theme that had been given him by His Majesty, and this he dedicated, engraved on copper, to the King.¹³

According to this document, the sequence of events appears to be as follows:

1. The king suggests the theme, playing it on the clavier, for Bach to improvise a fugue on it.
2. Bach improvises on the king's theme.
3. "Hereupon" the king suggests that Bach improvise a six-part fugue (the theme is not indicated).
4. Bach improvises a six-part fugue—on his own theme—to the amazement of the king and the musicians present in the palace.

The order of events again coincides with that described in the newspaper and Bach's dedication. However, in the obituary their dating and timing are less clear. Regarding points 1 and 2, it is obvious that they are associated with Sunday, May 7 (the first improvisation);¹⁴ while for the events noted in points 3 and 4, there is some obscurity. On the one hand, according to the newspapers, both these events took place on Monday, May 8 (the second improvisation). The obituary does not indicate to which date they relate (nor are the first two events dated). We can base our assumption only on the word "Hereupon" (*Hierauf*), but this can be interpreted in different ways and can relate both to the events of the same day and to the events of the day after.

A certain vagueness in the obituary draws our attention: the first reading seems to suggest that both events relate to the same day. If this is the case, one cannot help but notice a contradiction to the newspaper text, according to which the improvisations took place on different days—on Sunday, May 7 and on Monday, May 8. Indirectly, Bach's dedication of

¹³ C.P.E. Bach and Agricola, "The World-Famous Organist," *NBR*, 302-3.

¹⁴ It was on May 7, when the king played the theme on the fortepiano, that Bach was requested to develop it into a fugue.

the *Musical Offering* also indicates this. Mentioning the day of his improvisation on King Frederick's theme (i.e. May 7), Bach says nothing about any other improvisation on the same day. Would he not have mentioned it, if it had been directly connected to the *Musical Offering*? What might such a contradiction (direct in regard to the newspaper report and indirect regarding the dedication) mean? Why does the obituary allow us (and probably not coincidentally) to interpret the events as having taken place on the same day? Perhaps this was just a case of awkward phrasing? Or, what if, seven years after the day of the improvisation, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (Agricola did not attend the improvisation) had forgotten certain details of the musicale, and the events of the two days had merged in his mind into one, preserving, however, their sequence? Or, perhaps, C.P.E. Bach had forgotten nothing but had simply erred in writing about two improvisations on the same day?

These questions will be addressed later. Now, the main point is that irrespective of the various interpretations, correlating these events in time, the three above-considered documents say nothing whatsoever about Bach's declining the request, and nor do they even hint at such in regard to the king assigning the composer the task of improvising a six-part fugue on his (the king's) theme. Nor do they say that Bach either failed or declined to do so. Note that all the above relate to the most fundamental, credible, and authentic sources, which are considered here as documentary evidence.

It is fascinating to trace how the "facts" traveled from these to other, different, sources and publications, circulated among them, and resulted in the emergence of new "facts".

Secondary sources

The first to mention the Potsdam improvisation as an historical fact was Johann Adam Hiller. The story that is important for our purposes greatly resembles that in the obituary. In fact, Hiller simply quoted it from J.S. Bach's biography.¹⁵

¹⁵ Im Jahr 1747 that er eine Reise nach Berlin, und fand Gelegenheit, sich vor dem Könige von Preussen in Potsdam hören zu lassen. Der König gab ihm selbst ein Thema zu einer Fuge auf, die Bach sogleich, auf einem Pianoforte, sehr gelehrt und künstlich ausführte. Hierauf verlangte der König eine sechsstimmige Fuge zu hören, und Bach leistete diesem Befehle sogleich, über ein selbst gewähltes Thema, Gnüge. Nach seiner Zurückkunft nach Leipzig brachte er ein dreystimmiges und ein sechsstimmiges sogenanntes Ricercar, nebst noch einigen andern Kunststücken, über das vom Könige ihm aufgegebenes Thema, zu Papiere,

Six years later, in 1790, and also in Leipzig, a new biographical lexicon by Ernst Ludwig Gerber appeared. Here Bach's biography slightly differs from that in Hiller's publication: some facts have been omitted, others added. It is clear, however, that this later version was based on the re-worked obituary. Regarding the episode of the Potsdam improvisation, its facts are presented intact.¹⁶

Finally, in 1802, again in Leipzig, Forkel's famous book was published. No other documents or editions related to Potsdam story and preceding this book have been found.¹⁷

Forkel's book deserves special consideration. The famous anecdote that Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, had told Forkel is retold here embellished with some lively (sometimes invented) details. In the chapter 'The career of Bach' he writes:

But the King's expressions being repeated in several of his son's letters, he at length, in 1747, prepared to take this journey, in company of his eldest son, William [sic] Friedemann. At this time the King used to have every evening a private concert, in which he himself generally performed some concertos on the flute. One evening, just as he was getting his flute ready and his musicians were assembled, an officer brought him the written list of the strangers who had arrived. With his flute in his hand, he ran over the list, but immediately turned to the assembled musicians and said, with a

und widmete es, in Kupfer gestochen, demselben. [In 1747, he undertook a trip to Berlin and had the opportunity to play for the Prussian King in Potsdam. The King personally offered him the theme for a fugue, which Bach performed at once on the fortepiano with great skill and perfection. Then the King wished to listen to a six-part fugue, and Bach immediately executed this request on the theme chosen by himself, to general acclaim. Upon his return to Leipzig he presented the three-part and six-part so-called Ricercar and several other ingenious pieces on the same theme given by the King, providing it with the dedication and engraved on copper.] (Johann Adam Hiller *Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter Musikgelehrten und Tonkünstler neuerer Zeit* (Leipzig, 1784, Erster Theil, 19). Available also in <http://www.koelnklavier.de/quellen/hiller/bach.html#sub02> (accessed on March 3, 2019).

¹⁶ Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler, Erster Theil (A-M)* (Leipzig, 1790), 88. Gerber (1746-1819), a German musical lexicographer and organist, was the son and student of Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber (1702-1755), a German organist and Bach's student.

¹⁷ There was a Russian publication of Bach's biography in Johann Daniel Gerstenberg, ed., *Karmannaya knizhka dlya lyubiteley muzyki* [Handbook for music lovers] (St Petersburg, 1795). That biography was based on Gerber's book, though modifying one detail relating to the Potsdam improvisation and stating that Bach had improvised a fugue on his own theme (probably due to inaccurate translation).

kind of agitation: “Gentlemen, old Bach is come.” The flute was now laid aside; and old Bach, who had alighted at his son’s lodgings, was immediately summoned to the Palace. William Friedemann, who accompanied his father, told me this story, and I must say that I still think with pleasure on the manner in which he related it. At that time it was the fashion to make rather prolix compliments. The first appearance of J.S. Bach before so great a King, who did not even give him time to change his travelling dress for a black cantor’s gown, must necessarily be attended with many apologies. I will not here dwell on these apologies, but merely observe that in William Friedemann’s mouth they made a formal dialogue between the King and the apologist.

But what is more important than this is that the King gave up his concert for this evening and invited Bach, then already called the Old Bach, to try his fortepianos, made by Silbermann, which stood in several rooms of the Palace. [Forkel’s footnote on fortepianos follows—A.M.] The musicians went with him from room to room, and Bach was invited everywhere to try them and to play unpremeditated compositions. After he had gone on for some time, he asked the King to give him a subject for a fugue in order to execute it immediately without any preparation. The King admired the learned manner in which his subject was thus executed extempore; and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, expressed a wish to hear also a Fugue with six obbligato parts. But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony, Bach chose one himself and immediately executed it to the astonishment of all present in the same magnificent and learned manner as he had done that of the King. His Majesty desired also to hear his performance on the organ. The next day, therefore, Bach was taken to all the organs in Potsdam as he had before been to Silbermann’s fortepianos. After his return to Leipzig, he composed the subject which he had received from the King in three and six parts, added several intricate pieces in strict canon on the subject, had it engraved, under the title of *Musicalisches Opfer* [*Musical Offering*], and dedicated it to the inventor.¹⁸

Forkel’s book constitutes the earliest source from which the thesis emerged that Bach had failed to fulfill King Frederick’s request for an improvisation, substituting instead of the royal theme, his own theme for a six-part fugue. As Forkel himself indicates, this information was received from Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Moreover, Forkel allowed an obvious inaccuracy in regard to the publication of the obituary in Mizler’s *Musical Library*. Already in the first lines of his book, in the Preface, he refers to the obituary as *einige Nachrichten und Gedanken mitzuteilen der klein* (a short essay), published in *dritten Band* (which is an error: it was in the

¹⁸ Forkel’s Biography of Bach, *NBR*, 429-30.

fourth volume) of Mizler's *Musical Library*.¹⁹ It is impossible now to establish exactly all the details of Friedemann's story and the level of accuracy of its retelling in the book; it is also impossible to know whether Bach's biographer fully understood Friedemann correctly, and whether their combined memories truly provided the readers with all the relevant details.

The only clear thing is that the thesis of J.S. Bach's declining to fulfill the king's request to improvise a six-part fugue on a given theme is connected with Forkel's statement: "Weil aber nicht jedes Thema zu einer solchen Vollstimmigkeit geeignet ist, so wählte sich Bach selbst eines" ("But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony" [in six-part fugue—A.M.]).

To whom does the first part of the phrase belong? Who is its author? Wilhelm Friedemann? Forkel? Johann Sebastian? Judging from how it is presented in the book, these words appear to be an explanation given by Friedemann to Forkel and then retold by Forkel. *However, there is no indication of their belonging to J.S. Bach himself.*

Moreover, in Forkel's version of Friedemann's story *we do not find any mention of the king offering Bach his theme for a second improvisation.* To recall, the sentence states that "The King admired the learned manner in which his subject was thus executed extempore; and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, expressed a wish to hear also a Fugue with six obbligato parts."²⁰ The absence of any direct indication that the king had offered his own theme for this improvisation convinces us even more strongly that the first part of the phrase "But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony,"²¹ was not spoken by J.S. Bach; because, if there is no first event (offering the theme), then there can be no second one (declining to improvise and replacing the theme with Bach's own).

If, however, these words were not said by J.S. Bach, then they are either Forkel's explanation or Friedemann's (and then as retold by Forkel). If they were Forkel's, the discourse of Bach's refusal and replacing the theme does not make any sense, because it appears to be Forkel's invention. If considered as Friedemann's comment and interpreted as a reason for substitution of the theme, such an argument has at least some tenuous basis: that of *the witness Wilhelm Friedemann* (!) recounting everything to Forkel. In this case, however, one needs to consider Friedemann's story fully credible and accept that he was actually present at the event of the Potsdam improvisation.

¹⁹ This inaccuracy is especially strange considering Forkel's correspondence with C.P.E. Bach as well.

²⁰ Forkel's Biography of Bach, *NBR*, 430.

²¹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE WITNESS WILHELM FRIEDEMANN

Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710-1784) was the most talented of all Johann Sebastian's sons. In 1747, when J.S. Bach journeyed to Potsdam, Friedemann was at the height of his fame. Sufficient to say that a year earlier, in 1746, he had been invited to take up the position of church organist in Halle—without an audition (whereas for Johann Sebastian, who had also been invited to apply for this position in 1713, an audition had been obligatory!) By the time of J.S. Bach's Potsdam improvisation the son was enjoying the reputation of a great organist and was nearly as famous as his father.

The situation was quite different in the 1770s (a quarter of a century later), when Wilhelm Friedemann held his conversation with Forkel and told him the fascinating story of the improvisation at Frederick II's court. By that time Wilhelm Friedemann was already leading a hectic life, had quit the service, and was squandering his property and exploiting his father's manuscripts. Circumstances and his character drove him to dishonorable actions. In several instances, for self-promotion, he resorted to plagiarism, selling his father's autographs as if they were his own. Whereas in Halle such deceit had been revealed immediately after the performance (though purely by chance) and a public scandal had broken out,¹ his trick with the organ concerto (J.S. Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's concerto) was only uncovered by scholars at a much later date.²

¹ Wilhelm Friedemann was commissioned to write festive music for the University's event in Halle. However, he simply set the new text to one of J.S. Bach's cantatas, but was caught out in plagiarism. As a result of the scandal he lost his honorarium of one hundred thalers. The episode was described by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg in his *Legende einiger Musikheiligen* (Breslau: Cöllin, 1786, 60-3) and mentioned in C[arl] H[ermann] Bitter, *Carl Philipp Emanuel und Wilhelm Friedemann Bach und deren Brüder* (Berlin: Müller, 1868).

² J.S. Bach's organ concerto (D minor) BWV 596 is an arrangement of Vivaldi's organ concerto. It was considered as composed by Friedemann because of