

Distance From Genius: The Purpose of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Musical Offering*

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It was just before a physical education class in sophomore year when my friend Emi and I had a conversation that would eventually lead to the research project that has fascinated me for the better part of a year. Knowing I was a musician myself, she began by asking me if I knew what a fugue was, which I did (a fugue is a piece of music in which there is a central set of notes with intermingling voices around it that are all composed of slight variations on the main theme). She told me that she had been reading a book about three people, all geniuses in their fields, and how their ideas were connected. The book was *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter, and I listened intently as she explained the events that Hofstadter outlines in his first few chapters. It was then that I learned of the collection of pieces that J.S. Bach had composed in 1747 called the *Musical Offering*.

At this point, the extent of my knowledge on the *Musical Offering* was that among the pieces in the collection, there was a canon (similar to a fugue) that featured a specific theme with harmony repeated over and over again, each time a whole step higher. Once repeated enough times, the theme would arrive back in the original key. This was also when Emi introduced me to the concept of puzzle canons: canons that were deliberately presented in an incomplete form so that the recipient (usually a student) could use the patterns displayed earlier in the piece to finish it for themselves.

These puzzle canons were part of a group of ten canons, two fugues (or “ricercars”), and a trio sonata that made up the *Musical Offering*, which Bach had composed as a gift to King Frederick of Prussia. Each piece in the Offering was based on a 9-bar theme composed by Frederick the Great and given to Bach as a test of his

improvisatory skills during his visit to the King's court in Potsdam. Bach's masterful extemporizations on the King's theme as well as his entire collection of works, including brilliant pieces such as the *B Minor Mass* (BWV 232) and the *Art of the fugue* (BWV 1080), are widely viewed as the work of a true genius. His life and work are topics of discussion among music scholars worldwide. It was clear to me that Bach was, and is, very much a staple when discussing early western music in any capacity, and by delving into *why* he created one of his pieces, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of Bach's art and his life in general, which I can in turn use in my own music.

Experts in the field continue to publish their theories about the *Musical Offering's* roots and purpose. The topics of their theses range from the specific significance of six musical notes to Bach's views on God and the laws of music itself. In the following literature review, I will discuss scholarly work on the following topics and their relation to the *Musical Offering*: religion and nature, mathematics, the order of the 13 pieces, rhetoric, study and performance, the galant tastes that were growing in popularity at the time, and education.

Although the events of the night that Johann Sebastian Bach and King Frederick met in May of 1747 are quite well documented, the intentions and significance of the subsequent *Musical Offering*, composed by Bach, are a subject of debate among Bach scholars.

BACH-GROUND INFORMATION:

In his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (1979), Douglas Hofstadter paints a picture of the night Frederick and Bach first met, describing a young King who was eager to meet Old Bach, the “father of harmony.” Frederick was so eager, in fact, that Bach was not even permitted to change out of his traveling attire before being brought to try out the King’s new collection of Silbermann fortepianos and showcase his talent as an improviser on the keyboard (4). He was first asked to improvise a 3-part fugue (no easy task for any musician) and then a 6-part fugue, a feat that Hofstadter compares to playing 6 simultaneous blindfolded games of chess and winning them all (7). “The six-part fugue is one of Bach’s most complex creations,” he says, “and the theme is, of course, the Royal Theme. That theme ... is a very complex one, rhythmically irregular and highly chromatic ... To write a decent fugue of even two voices based on it would not be easy for the average musician!” (7). The Royal Theme (*thema regium*), composed by King Frederick, was the basis for each of the pieces in the *Musical Offering*.

Prior to their meeting, the two men had grown up in vastly different worlds. Michael Marissen, a professor of music and Swarthmore College, writes about their contrasting lives in his book, *Bach & God*. At the time of their encounter, Bach would have been 62 years old and Frederick 35. Bach was a devout Christian. He saw music as something used to honor God and bring the composer on a spiritual journey. King Frederick, on the other hand, was pro-enlightenment, decidedly not religious, and thought that music should be uncomplicated and for the pleasure of the listener. Bach (a

German) famously did not like the French (of which Frederick was very fond), and Frederick once remarked that German poets were doomed never to be understood because of the nature of the German language (198). J.S. Bach and King Frederick could not be more diametrically opposed.

But in order to understand how Bach came to create this collection of pieces, it is necessary to understand both the way he created art and the way he interacted with the world.

“[Bach] took the art of composing to a level where it replicates to perfection the fullness and harmoniousness of Creation itself,” says Martin Geck, a German musicologist, in his book, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* (2000). Geck goes on to assert that the music of most composers in the Baroque era essentially boiled down to melody and harmonic accompaniment. Bach, however, was a true master in that he was capable of blending the two to the point where they become almost indistinguishable from each other.

This blending is the foundation for the Baroque counterpoint style that Bach used. Counterpoint was, in essence, the blending of different melodies together according to a set of rules so that the melodies themselves (sometimes vastly different from one another) worked in conjunction. According to Geck, “Bach stoutly resists the modern, enlightened idea that the most natural and human way to experience music is in the form of melody plus accompaniment (645),” and demonstrates that “beyond individual works, genres, and styles there lay *music itself* – not as a construct of musical theology and music theory but as sovereign state where the composer ruled as artist

and philosopher (650).” What Geck refers to here as the “modern, enlightened idea” is also called the “galant style,” defined by its elegant and homophonic melodies.

RELIGION:

Some scholars believe that Bach composed the *Musical Offering* with religion in mind. During Bach's lifetime, music as an art form was beginning to move away from its foundation on math, geometry, and astronomy and more towards rhetoric, logic, and grammar. Bach, however, resisted this change. In fact, he continued to compose music the way he felt that it was meant to be composed, the way he believed was natural. Throughout his life, Bach's devotion to God through his art became “total,” so much so that God and art became synonymous in his mind (Geck, 650).

The fact that Bach was a devout Christian and he used the scripture to write weekly cantatas during the time he spent working for the four major churches in Leipzig is a well known fact, particularly due to the annotations in his personal Bible. However, Geck writes that Bach's compositions alone cannot serve as sufficient evidence of his religious beliefs. “Faith cannot be proven, and certainly not by examining a work of art (659),” he says. There is a necessary line to be drawn between conjecture about the effect of Bach's faith on his work and the emotional impact that his music has on an unbiased listener. To give an example, the descending chromatic fourth was a device that Bach used somewhat frequently to represent Jesus's suffering at the cross. Geck and other Bach scholars know this in part because of Bach's own specification but also because of the prior use of the chromatic fourth for this purpose in

the sacred music of the middle ages (656). But it would be nearly impossible for someone who had not studied Bach's life and music to immediately discern that these six notes were a direct reference to the crucifixion of Jesus.

Because of this, Michael Marissen believes that the *Musical Offering* was a sort of comment on Frederick's relationship with religion. He links the inscription on Canon no. 9 in the *Musical Offering*, "Quaerendo invenietis," to the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew in the bible. An almost direct translation of these words in Matthew 7 is "seek and ye shall find," referring to seeking faith from God (215/216). Furthermore, the inscription on both fugues in the *Musical Offering*, "Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta" (Latin for "the Theme Given by the King's Command, with Additions, Resolved According to the Canonic Style") spells out the word "ricercar" with the first letter of each word. *Ricercar*, defined as an elaborate piece of music that is often fugal or canonic in nature, comes from the Latin *Ricercare* meaning "to find" or "seek out." And what one is meant to seek out, for Lutherans that is, is salvation (216).

Also from a linguistic standpoint, the title page of the *Musical Offering* is brimming with evidence for a religious interpretation, Marissen says. On it, the word "opfer" is written largely, signifying its importance (219). Marissen says the most accurate translation of this word in this context would be "consecrate," which has religious implications and would make the dedication "smell of the church." The dedicatory letter also uses the words "rühmen" and "verherrlichen," both meaning "to glorify." Marissen links this to psalm 8, which is about "glorifying the glory" of God

through his name and his “ruhm” (rühmen) (221). Much like the law in the eyes of Luther, glory has two meanings: one that is of this world and one that is spiritual. Here, Bach was referring to spiritual glory (215).

Marissen also argues that Bach purposefully composed the actual music in a religious style. In most of his music, Bach stuck to dominant and subdominant modulations, but in the *Musical Offering*, he ventured to keys outside of his comfort zone, often in the downwards direction. These types of jarring key changes were more typically found in his church cantatas and arias. Even when using elements more in line with the King’s galant tastes such as parallel thirds and sixths and the sonata, Bach peppers them with modulations and contrapuntal style typically found in his sacred music. The *thema regium* is nine bars long, and in the trio sonata of the *Musical Offering*, the counterpoint is ten bars long. The Royal Theme enters a bar late, making it seem like a secondary voice (200).

In terms of the effect of religion on Bach’s music, Wilfrid Mellers, an English music critic and composer, agrees with Marissen. “For him, all music was a ‘harmonious euphony for the glory of God and the instruction of my neighbor,’” says Mellers on page 9 of his book, *Bach and the Dance of God*. It’s possible that Bach viewed King Frederick as a “neighbor” or pupil, and felt he needed to instruct him (This idea of the *Musical Offering* as a tool for education will be discussed later in this literature review).

More specific to the *Musical Offering*, Mellers traces the method in which it was created back to the Middle Ages. The Medieval *motet*, a sacred piece of choral music,

was written using *cantus firmus*, just like the *Musical Offering*. The basis or theme in a *motet* was given by God, and the harmony was added afterwards (257). This type of *cantus firmus* was inherently religious by nature, and it's likely that Bach saw it this way.

RELIGION & NATURE:

Music is a reflection of the natural world, and Bach used harmony as a way of reducing the world to its simplest form, similar to Picasso's work in cubism (Geck 652). While mathematicians and physicists can only calculate the way the world works theoretically, musicians and artists have the unique ability to make these theories "available to the senses through the medium of sound (644)." Martin Geck says this happens in two ways: "On the one hand, the numerical relations at the basis of music reflect the laws of how the world is built; on the other hand, music uses these laws in a unique way for the praise of God and the edification of mankind (644)." This idea became what Bach saw as his duty; he was meant to show the natural connection and harmony between all things and through that, serve God and his creation.

Wilfrid Mellers also points out that all forms of art, including Bach's music, come from imitating nature (3). Music comes from imitating the sounds of the world – it is a search for identity in a universe we do not understand. Bach's tempos, for example, are that of a person walking or a heart beating. His rhythms come from spoken language (9). "The utterance of the human infant resembles that of the beasts. Both speak a language pre-existent to consciousness, which consciousness must and does obliterate

(Mellers 3).” Once we are conscious of the world, we wish to be a part of it, and consciousness of that consciousness leads to abstraction, Mellers says. “When once we know, we wish to *know how* (7).” Bach believed that once one was conscious of one's own freedoms, volitions, and desires, only then could they obtain perfection.

Mellers also asserts that while most visual art is created in order to freeze a moment in time, instrumental music cannot do this in the same way. Because of this, music is often associated with the mystical, spiritual, and religious (7). Bach seems to represent this idea more than other composers of his time. His beats are clearly natural, like those of a pulse, and his complex harmony and polyphony invoke and control natural tension and emotion. “Over this, earth-beat independent polyphonies sing and wing, often transcending, sometimes even contradicting, the beat, so that the lines induce ecstasy, as does a religious chant” (9). In this way, the steady and horizontal rhythms are contrasted by spiraling vertical harmony, which Mellers compares to the Christian Cross (9).

MATH & ORDER:

Mellers points out that number and math in music is not an “imposition,” but a law in which we and music exist (Bach, of course, saw this as God’s law). An example of this lies in puzzle pieces. On page 257, Mellers notes that “A puzzle piece such as Machaut’s *Ma fin est mon commencement* [or some parts of the *Musical Offering*] (wherein the tenor accompanies the cantus with the same melody backwards, while the

countertenor proceeds to its middle point and then inverts itself) may be said to ‘music’ by mathematical permutation a philosophical concept.” Within this system of rules, “humanity flowers,” he states, “in the smooth lines and sensuously triadic harmony – through the acceptance of mathematical law; and can do so because that law is envisaged as philosophical, if not exactly theological (257).” In the Bible, Solomon says that God made everything by “measure, number, and weight (Geck, 670).” In Greece, mathematicians said harmony was closely related to cosmology. The planets, for example, always obeyed the laws of the universe. This was the nature of the “harmony of the spheres,” and the law of the universe. And “Bach’s revelation of law led to a self reborn (Mellers 261).” This law applied to music as well.

Martin Geck agrees and adds that many of Bach’s pieces contained elements of math, namely mathematical symmetry in their structure. The *Musical Offering* is a prime example of such symmetry; it begins with a ricercar, proceeded by 5 canons, then the trio sonata, 5 more canons, and another ricercar. Geck claims that this sort of symmetrical ordering was natural to Bach. However, while addressing other scholars and their theories about mathematical symbols in Bach’s work (such as Marissen claiming that the 10 canons represent the 10 commandments), he remarks that “those who want to know more about this aspect of Bach [the mathematical aspect of his work], who need to come up with round sums or interesting symbolic numbers, often have to go to great lengths to come up with a theory that actually is convincing on paper (671).” He continues by suggesting that “the question of whether there are any other esoteric numerological speculations in his work, the results of which only God can

judge, for now must remain a matter of faith (672),” and by asking a thought-provoking question: “what sense is there in counting up the number of notes, bar lines, articulation symbols, and letters (first converted to numbers) in the *Musical Offering*, to obtain a ‘*summa summarum* of the dedicatory copy’ of 68,921, a number that, along with any other variants and partial sums, can be interpreted in any number of ways (673)?”

Bach was a well educated person and very well could have composed with a numerical alphabet or included numerical symbolism in his work. Sometimes numerical alphabets were even the keys to puzzle canons that he used with his students and friends (Geck, 672). But Bach wasn’t the best or most consistent when it came to notating his work or writing things down in general, so most conclusions that scholars come to could be deemed questionable because of the almost complete lack of explanation from the composer himself. “Whoever deals professionally with Bach manuscripts sees slips of the pen, unclear notations, slurred notes, unsystematically placed double bars, inconsistent articulation symbols, and – on top of this – many changes,” Geck says. “Arriving at a musically definitive, graphically correct version is generally a long process and often ends in a question mark” (673). But he still maintains that the symmetrical nature of the *Musical Offering* was both intentional and intuitive to Bach (673).

Hans T. David, a German-born musicologist and author of the book *J.S. Bach’s Musical Offering: History, Interpretation, and Analysis* agrees. “The symmetry of the entire work is mirrored in its centerpiece (35),” he says, highlighting the fact that the trio sonata (the centerpiece), is symmetrical in its form as well, and calls the *Musical Offering*

“one of the greatest examples of a multiple work unified by a comprehensive structure (37).”

ORDER:

David believes that the collection was composed as a “complete and unified whole (43),” meant to be performed from start to finish, and that this is reflected in the order of the pieces. This is similar to what Martin Geck says about unity in Bach’s work: “Bach goes beyond the tradition of grouping like things together; instead, he collects things of very different character on the same theme (646).” Although David points out that the 10 canons were not meant to show the complete scope of the canonic form (as Bach did not include canons with uninverted augmentation or any other intervals besides octaves and fifths in the unison canons), David interprets Bach’s use of the word *Ricercar*, as a nod to the fact that what unified the *Musical Offering* was “searching” for the *Thema Regium* in all of its possible forms.

When it comes to the order, doctor of historical musicology, Ursula Kirkendale acknowledges that most people, including Hans David, see the symmetrical order as the correct one, but also points out that most people or groups who have done a start-to-finish performance of the *Musical Offering* have presented it in vastly different orders. Some even perform the collection with one of the canons placed in between the movements of the trio sonata. This is due, in part, to the fact that no autographed versions of the entire collection that are bound and ordered in the way that was originally intended by J.S. Bach exist. Therefore, educated speculation about the order is

necessary, but also possibly inaccurate. Nevertheless, Kirkendale suggests that “Musical form, like that of a drama, sermon, or forensic speech, should therefore not be confused with optical categories (91).” In essence, she is saying that a symmetrical order is possible, but, it being a piece of instrumental music, should not be looked at from a visual standpoint.

ORDER: *Comparisons to Quintilian's Institutio Oratoria*

Kirkendale also theorizes about a link between Bach’s *Musical Offering* and Marcus Fabius Quintilianus’s *Institutio Oratoria*, published in the first century CE. Firstly, Kirkendale points out that “preludial ricercares” in older music were meant as an introduction. The English translation of the word, “to seek out or find,” referred to seeking out the themes of the rest of the piece in the introduction. In some of Aristotle’s works, the proem was translated as “ricercar,” and Cicero was of the opinion that this specific type of prelude (the ricercar) was intended to captivate an audience that might not have agreed with what the speaker was about to say (93). Kirkendale suggests that the *Musical Offering* was essentially a peace offering, meant to get the attention of King Frederick, who did not yet approve of the contrapuntal style of music that Bach favored (93).

Kirkendale points out that there is no hard evidence that Bach had studied Quintilian’s work. However, in his early years, it’s highly likely that he would have been schooled in oration and rhetoric, topics that demand a discussion of the *Institutio Oratoria* (95). According to this textbook, the introduction to a speech should not be

overly eloquent or overdone. "We shall derive some silent support if we say we are weak, unprepared, and no match for the talents of our opponents," Quintilian says, "for there is a natural partiality to the underdog ... Hence the pretence of the ancients of concealing their eloquence (96-97)." With this in mind, Kirkendale notes the similarity between Quintilian's idea of what an introduction should be and Bach's first encounter with Frederick. At his visit to Potsdam, Bach acted as if he were unprepared to improvise for the king, and wrote a dedicatory letter that was flattersome and almost submissive. Quintilian's book also says that one should use simple speech so that the introduction seems genuine and improvised. Similarly, in his introduction, the 3-part-fugue, Bach sticks to simple eighth notes and conjunct chromatic descent (97).

The first real argument in a rhetorical speech should be quick, elegant, easy to comprehend, and followed by longer arguments. This corresponds to the Canon Perpetuus, which is five measures long (the shortest canon) and followed by 5 longer canons. These 5 canons correspond directly with the 5 virtues of Quintilian's *narratorio longa*: naturalness, mimicry, simplicity, magnificence, and palpability (103).

The first virtue states that we must say "nothing contrary to nature." Bach's corresponding canon, the crab canon, is a natural phenomenon that has an equivalent in music: it "walks backward" like a crab (104).

The next virtue, mimicry, is mirrored in the *Violini in Unisono* canon, with the two violins representing people. Each one is its own voice: one is a question, and one is an answer (104/105).

Simplicity has perhaps the least obvious representation in the third canon, *motum contrarium*. It consists of only 8th and 16th notes and is a very simple inverted canon with the voices separated by half a measure. Bach conceals this simplicity with contrary motion, making the imitation less obvious (106).

The next canon, *canon per augmentationem/contrario motu* has the royal theme and the higher voice imitates the lower with augmentation and contrary motion. It has a triumphant and magnificent French rhythm, relating it to the fourth virtue (107). Finally, there is the *canon per tonos*, which creates an effect that Kirkendale calls “tangible.” The listener can feel the music rising through the keys, which Kirkendale links to the fifth and final virtue: palpability (108).

According to the *Institutio Oratoria*, there are two ways to end a rhetorical speech: with facts and with emotion. Kirkendale argues that the trio sonata aligns more with the emotional approach. Its different movements work together in a way that recaps the rest of the collection and reinforces its pathos.

Contrary to what other scholars have said, Kirkendale asserts that, once one understands the order of the *Musical Offering*, a complete performance of it is no less necessary than an uninterrupted version of a rhetorical speech to be read (131). But all of this begs the question: why didn’t Bach specify this connection to the *Institutio Oratoria*? Reverend Malcolm Boyd, author of the book *Bach*, says this isn’t enough and calls Kirkendale’s hypothesis an “extraordinary coincidence (219).”

Boyd assumes the perspective of an imaginary Leipzig citizen whom he says could very well have knocked on J.S. Bach’s door in the late 1740s and walked away

with a copy of the *Musical Offering*. “Our imaginary Leibziger would have found his purchase to consist of music for a variety of uses: a fugue to play at the keyboard, another in six parts for study and contemplation, a sonata to perform with friends, and canons to occupy the musical intellect,” Boyd points out, “he would read in the dedication Bach’s reference to Frederick the Great as a man famed for his ‘greatness and strength in all the sciences of war and peace, and especially in music’, and he would see how the composer had demonstrated the comparable versatility of the royal theme in a variety of styles (219).” But if our fictitious Leipzig-residing friend had the misfortune of tripping on their way from the great composer’s house and the papers they’d just recently acquired had fallen to the ground out of order, Boyd says that there is absolutely no way that, once they arrived back home, they could have put the music back into the order that Bach had intended, even if they were familiar with Quintilian’s work. He even goes so far as to say that Bach would not have cared if the Leipziger had come back to his house wanting to know the original order because the order only ever matters if one wants to perform the collection from start to finish, and we have no evidence to say those were Bach’s wishes (219).

Kirkendale counters this argument by pointing out that had Bach explained his intentions and the connection between the *Musical Offering* and the *Institutio Oratoria*, it would have defeated the purpose entirely (133).

Nonetheless, Hans T. David agrees with Kirkendale. He adds that “The ten canons in the *Musical Offering* clearly fall into two contrasting sets of five (22),” in that the first group is based in cantus firmus, the second is all “canonic material.” This is

expressed in the titles given to the two groups, “*Canones diversi super thema regium*” (Various canons on the royal theme) and “*Thematis regii elaborationes canonicae*” (Canonic elaborations on the royal theme).

RHETORIC:

While considering all of this, it is impossible not to contemplate what creates rhetoric in music, specifically instrumental music. The purpose of the *Musical Offering* is rendered irrelevant if we cannot understand the devices he used to create rhetoric and meaning. We know that music is not devoid of devices to convey emotion, but how do musicians portray specific imagery like what Kirkendale describes in a medium that is not specific?

To Martin Geck, the answer is simply that music becomes rhetorical when it contradicts expectations, which gives the piece a sense of autonomy; it does what it is meant to do regardless of the listeners’ biases. This could be as simple as using an uncommon chord progression, melodic structure, or non-diatonic notes. Rhetoric, in this sense, comes from dissonance, an idea that was used increasingly beginning in the 17th century (660).

Contrary to Kirkendale, however, Geck questions whether or not Bach would need the concepts of basic rhetoric that are outlined by Quintilian to give his music structure. He was, again, an educated man and fully capable of doing it himself. Geck also adds that Bach’s art never served just one purpose. He never wrote a recitative that was just about the lyrics or an aria that was just about the dance rhythm (662).

STUDYING VS. PERFORMING:

In his book, Michael Marissen makes the point that, while Bach intended his *Musical Offering* to be studied and analyzed (193), King Frederick showed interest only in listening to it and performing it (200). Marissen cites a 1774 encounter that Frederick had with the Dutch diplomat Baron van Swieten, where he told the story of the day Bach visited his court and improvised on the Royal Theme. Frederick told van Swieten that he had sung a theme for Bach, who then improvised a 4-part fugue, a 5-part fugue, and an 8-part fugue, none of which is remotely true (Bach improvised a 3-part-fugue and then a 6-part fugue, and an 8-part fugue is far beyond human capability). Frederick viewed fugues as a genre that was simply enjoyable to listen to, and would have enjoyed one with a random theme just as much as those composed based on the Royal Theme (203).

The idea that the 13 pieces of the *Musical Offering* were only meant to be studied is another topic of debate. Dennis Collins and Andrew Schloss write in their article, "The Unusual Effect in the Canon Per Tonos From J.S. Bach's *Musical Offering*," that the Canon Per Tonos has an unusual effect on the listener who is not meant to notice the modulations in the piece due to the layered chromatic harmony. The Canon Per Tonos features the same 8 bar phrase repeated over and over again, each time a whole step higher; the canon moves from the original key of C minor, through D minor, E minor, F# minor, G# minor, A# minor, and finally back to C minor (142). By arguing that this effect is intentional and would not be achieved by simply studying it, Collins and

Schloss refute the claim that the *Musical Offering*, or at the very least the Canon Per Tonos, was indeed meant to be performed and listened to (143).

Mary Oleskiewicz, a flutist and music professor at University of Massachusetts also highlights evidence in a separate part of the *Musical Offering* in her article, "The Trio in Bach's Musical Offering: A Salute to Frederick's Tastes and Quantz's Flutes?," that the trio sonata of the *Musical Offering* was formatted in order to avoid the necessity to turn pages which also points to it being meant for performance (Oleskiewicz, 90).

EDUCATION:

If one chooses to believe that the *Musical Offering* was meant to be studied, it would imply that Bach's original intention was to educate King Frederick. According to Phillip Spitta, a music historian from Germany, Bach's teaching method was one that differed substantially from that of the other geniuses of the time (Spitta, 48). Most of the great music masters, to whom music came naturally, were not good teachers because they were ineffective at communicating concepts to a pupil, to whom music techniques did not come as naturally. Bach, an organ virtuoso, however, had the experience of learning a new instrument, the clavier, later in life, which gave him a new perspective and allowed him to explain himself better than his teacher peers (48). Bach also made sure that his student's were capable of using every one of their fingers, including less dominant ones for trills and embellishments. "He never wrote a clavier piece which did not serve as a healthy gymnastic for the fingers (54)" Spitta says. He adds that Bach would always play a piece through to the end for a student before starting to teach it so

that the student could have an end goal in mind. One of the pieces in the beginning clavier book that Bach wrote, for example, is intentionally not finished. Bach expected the player to realize the patterns in the piece and finish it on their own. His teaching method was based on increasing difficulty to the point where, eventually, the students would teach themselves. Many pieces that he wrote were specifically composed for teaching, like the puzzle canons in the *Musical Offering* (54).

David Shavin of the Schiller Institute sees Bach's use of canons as a method to uncover "higher order pathways" in one's mind. In his essay, "The Strategic Significance of J.S. Bach's Musical Offering," Shavin writes that canons, and specifically puzzle canons, were used as pedagogical aids. "Once the original thematic idea had been taken apart (e.g., examined upside down, frontwards and backwards, stretched out, and reflected against itself in different proportions), the wealth of possible connections to be developed could be integrated into a larger, more powerful fugue of greater voices (Shavin)." He theorizes that, in requesting to hear the genius of Bach and exposing his mind to new musical ideas, Frederick should then seek to make his own mind grow as a result. It was the job of whomever received the puzzle to explore all of the possible ways to expand on one theme. This is what Shavin interprets to be the meaning of the term "ricercar." The king should be "seeking out" the answers to these puzzle canons and, through this, a wealth of new concepts in music. Shavin questions whether the inscriptions on the canons (which read: "and as the modulation rises, so may the King's Glory" and "as the notes grow, so may the King's Fortune") should be viewed as teachings or hints about the solution to the puzzle canons.

On the same topic, Malcolm Boyd recounts that “because a [puzzle] canon tested the ingenuity of the solver as well as that of the composer, it had become by Bach’s time a favorite device for dedications and for greetings between friends (211).” Boyd goes on to say, “While such canons as these were never intended as more than marks of esteem in the form of intriguing musical puzzles, Bach made frequent use of canon in his other works, either in symbolic representation of a text or, more often, simply as a compositional technique (212).” Given all of this, an interpretation of the *Musical Offering* as a pedagogical tool is by no means unprecedented, and a perspective assumed by many Bach scholars.

PERFORMANCE:

However, music in and of itself is primarily meant to be heard, so it stands to reason that scholars would contemplate if and how Bach intended for the *Musical Offering* to be performed. Scottish classical arranger and violist, Watson Forbes believes that the order of these pieces only matter if one wishes to do a complete performance. This performance, he adds, was most likely meant to be an intimate small concert at the court of the king (332). On most of the pieces, Bach never specified instrumentation, but when he did, he made it clear that the collection was meant for only a few solo instruments, if not a solo clavier. In this type of music, it was customary at the time to leave an “open score,” meaning a lack of specification about instrumentation as well as very few dynamic markings so that any combination of instruments could play it. Bach was likely following the custom (334).

PERFORMANCE: *The Trio Sonata*

One notable exception to this sort of “open score” style is the trio sonata, meant for violin, flute, and continuo. Frederick, who was the sole flutist at his court, would be the one to play that part (Oleskiewicz, 90).

Mary Oleskiewicz notes that the keys and movements of the sonata are highly unusual for a baroque flutist, to the point that it would be exceedingly difficult to play on an average flute at the time. “The keys of the four movements (C minor and Eb major) are rather unusual for the Baroque flute,” says Oleskiewicz in her essay, “The Trio in Bach’s Musical Offering: A Salute to Frederick’s Tastes and Quantz’s Flutes,” “this together with the chromatic style of counterpoint makes Bach’s trio sonata a tour de force of Baroque flute playing (79).” She then asks the question, “Did Bach compose an unsuitable, unidiomatic trio for Frederick (79)?” Was this an intentional jab at the king’s flute skills?

Dr. Oleskiewicz says it was not. The flutes used at the court in Potsdam were quite unique. They were made by Frederick’s teacher, J.J. Quantz, who had been educated in counterpoint and was not as intolerant of the old style as some make him out to be (81/83). The rather primitive flute that was used in other parts of the world was usually two-keyed and made of ebony.

Quantz added a tuning slide to his flutes, which also had separate keys for the notes of Eb and D#. (In fact, some string players at the time did make adjustments for this phenomenon (91). However, Quantz usually told the keyboard accompanist to simply omit these notes, as they did not have the distinction between the two pitches.)

The separate keys for Eb and D# allowed for several intervals to be more mathematically accurate and sound more correct to the ear: B and D# made a better major third, the Eb and Bb now made a more perfect fifth, the major third between Eb and G that was too wide on 12 tone instruments was narrowed, and the minor third between C and Eb that was usually too narrow was now expanded (91). Quantz's flutes were also built to have a stronger low F, which acts as an important secondary dominant in the key of Eb major/C minor and brings the primary dominant, Bb, into tune (95).

Oleskiewicz points out that all of these modifications made a performance of the trio sonata (which was written in the key of Cm) significantly easier. She argues that, having just returned from his visit to the court where he was familiarized with the tastes of the king and the instruments and musicians that he had at his disposal, Bach most likely composed the sonata specifically for a performance by King Frederick and his accompanists (101).

STYLE: *Contrapuntal vs. Galant*

Regarding the trio sonata, scholar Anthony Piraino of Boston College has a separate opinion concerning the galant and contrapuntal styles in the piece. In his essay, "The Trio in the "Musical Offering": Perceptions of Bach Late in Life," Piraino asserts that many young people at the time didn't strictly oppose counterpoint, but rather mixed it with other, newer styles. The trio sonata specifically was Bach's attempt to

show that the old and new styles can coexist and the world could discover possibilities within music (2).

Like Oleskiewicz said, there were elements of counterpoint in the compositions of Quantz and C.P.E. Bach, both of whom were in the employ of Frederick the Great. There is evidence to suggest that the king was not always outwardly rejecting this style, and some of the pieces that we know were played at his court were indeed written in the older fashion (5). Along a similar vein, Piraino explains that “having studied centuries of material and integrated much of it into his music, Bach would have necessarily gained an appreciation for the pendulum of taste in music history. This makes it difficult to see the *Musical Offering* as a denunciation of the *galant* (16).”

Considering all of this, it is unlikely that the collection was composed entirely out of spite, and more probably that it was an attempt to show that the two distinct styles could coexist.

Nevertheless, some still believe that the *Musical Offering* as a whole was inherently galant and that Bach had purposefully written it this way. In his essay, “The “Galant” Style in J.S. Bach’s “Musical Offering:” Widening the dimensions,” professor of music, Gregory Butler cites Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, a German music critic, who said that some of the elements in Bach’s canons are similar to those in other galant canons by other German Baroque composers like Pepusch, Fasch, and Graupner. This puts Bach’s pieces in the same category as *Canons Melodieux* by German composer Georg Philipp Telemann: the “galant canonic style of writing (59).” Telemann’s canons only had two voices, similar to Canon a. 2, which was composed of two violins and had

a similar octave echo in the second voice one full measure later. Butler believes this is intended to make the direct echo even more prominent because the same instrument and the same tone is producing it (62). This is further reinforced by the fact that the Canon a. 2, *Violini in Unisono*, was also one of the only pieces in the offering where Bach specified instrumentation (64). Besides the Ricercars, both written for the harpsichord, only this canon, the *Canon Perpetuo*, and the trio sonata had an intended instrumentation that was written down.

Dr Elizabeth Seitz, a professor at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee College of Music, believes just the opposite. In a personal interview with Dr. Seitz, she addressed this concept of demonstrating all of the different ways one could elaborate on a given theme. “[In the 1740s] he starts doing what I think of as encyclopedic pieces. Kind of like, ‘here's everything you can do with this,’” she said, “so, for instance, the *Musical Offering* is a good example of that encyclopedic approach.” This is similar to Hans T. David’s point that the *Musical Offering* is essentially a demonstration of the *Thema Regium* in different forms. Dr. Seitz, links this “encyclopedic approach” to Bach’s desire to prove that his favored style of learned counterpoint was not yet dead. She says that Bach was, in essence, “looking back at an older style and saying, here's why this older style is still relevant in our lives.”

Dr. Seitz brought up the fact that Bach is the only composer that, when he died, the world agreed that the current era of music had ended. Different musical periods – Medieval, Renaissance, Classical, early and late Romantic – all took a significant amount of time to be phased out before the next style caught on. However, when Bach

died in 1750, the world decided that Baroque music was over and that the Classical era was beginning. At the end of his life, Bach could see the new Classical style catching on in composers like his son, C.P.E. Bach, and J.J. Quantz, King Frederick's accompanist and flute maker. "I think he wanted to prove he was not obsolete," Seitz remarked, "that there were still things to say in the older style."

CONCLUSION:

Bach died just three years after writing the *Musical Offering* due to a stroke and complications from a harmful surgery, never having revealed his purpose for the collection. Although Bach scholars and experts continue to debate the *Musical Offering's* relationship to the fields and ideas that I have discussed – religion, mathematics, the order of the 13 pieces, rhetoric, study & performance, the competing galant and contrapuntal tastes at the time, and pedagogy – no one can seem to agree on just one answer to the question of what exactly the purpose of the *Musical Offering* was. Furthermore, any theories presented essentially come down to just conjecture.

One detail that all authors I have discussed can agree on is that religion was an important aspect of Bach's life; his personal Calov Bible and years composing for the Thomaskirche in Leipzig are evidence enough. Also widely accepted is the fact that, in the mid 1700s, music was undergoing a paradigm shift in style from the older contrapuntal method of composition to the new galant style, and that most of Bach's music, if not all, was written using the former. Beyond that, it seems most everyone in the field has a different opinion on the purpose of the collection.

When I first began my research, my expectation was that the information I would find would have to do mostly with the educational aspects of the *Musical Offering*. To me at least, this seemed to be the most obvious conclusion one could draw given the use of the puzzle canons. It may be that I simply did not look hard enough for research on this topic or that it is just not what scholars believe, but it seemed that there was a startlingly low amount of scholarly work linking the *Musical Offering* to pedagogy.

Given all that I ended up learning, I can now say that I was pleasantly surprised. I discovered a wealth of research about symbolism in music, why we write it, and where it comes from. Researching everything that could affect a genius like J.S. Bach and his work can truly change the way that one looks at composition and music itself. It gives us insight into the purpose of music as a medium and what it means to create art.

The debate over the purpose of Bach's *Musical Offering* caused me to wonder if Bach ever intended that there be a purpose, or if it matters that we know what it is. More broadly, I began to wonder if it is ever worth trying to figure out a purpose for any piece of music. I think it is a question more than worth exploring, which is why, for my final project I intend to compose puzzle canons based on a theme given to me by someone else. This is something I've never done before and perhaps by taking steps similar to Bach when he composed the *Musical Offering*, I will better understand his intentions. I think that this investigation is worthy and will help inform me about the way that art makes me feel and how I can use it. Thoughts such as these had seldom crossed my mind before I began research on this project, and I am beyond grateful that I've had the chance to expand my thinking in this way.

Nevertheless, as I reflect on the last few months, there's one thing that still evades me. Towards the end of my interview with Dr. Elizabeth Seitz, she asked me if I had ever heard a piece of music that I absolutely loved, but was unable to articulate the emotions it evoked in me. I replied that I had; this sort of thing has happened to me more times than I can count. The way that the second winter movement in Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the *allegro* movement of the trio sonata in the *Musical Offering*, and Frédéric Chopin's *Prelude in E-minor* make me feel is so profound, yet so inexplicable, and this feeling is possibly the biggest reason why I fell in love with music. For such a long time, I have wanted to understand why I felt that way. It has taken me years of my life, massive amounts of research, and an entire literature review about the purpose of one of my favorite collections of music to realize that I will never know why music makes me feel the way that it does. And if I'm being quite honest, I am perfectly alright with that.

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