

GUPEA

Registration of artistic work.

Name

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Affiliation

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Project name

Playing around with Bach's Violin Works at the Clavichord: exploring a tradition of keyboard improvisation in performance

Ihr Verfasser spielte sie selbst oft auf dem Clavichorde, und fügte von Harmonie so viel dazu bey, als er für nöthig befand. Er erkannte auch hierinn die Notwendigkeit einer klingenden Harmonie, die er bey jener Composition nicht völliger erreichen konnte.¹

This surprising insight into a tradition of playful music-making in the Bach household comes from a letter written by the Bach student Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720 – 1774). Bach apparently sat down at the clavichord – often enough for Agricola to describe it as a habit – and played his solo violin works (BWV 1001-1006), while improvising keyboard realizations with just enough harmonies to be tasteful, but only as many as necessary. The editor of *Bach Dokumente* warns that the performer shouldn't attempt *etwa eine harmonische Ergänzungsbedürftigkeit der Violinwerke* (Schulze 1972, 293). Apart from the Geigenwerk, which never reached a wide popularity, the clavichord is the only keyboard instrument that demands a technique for tone production intimately related to the violin. This technique requires that the player learn to balance some weight of the natural arm on the key in order to keep contact with a pair of strings. At the clavichord, the fingers work like the left hand of the violin, defining the length of the string and the duration for each sounding note, while the balanced weight of the arm works like the bow hand at the violin, transferring weight across several fingers like the downward-bearing energy exerted by the bow to make the strings vibrate. One of the main purposes of this project has been to explore how the bowings, articulations and figures at the violin might generate new insights for keyboard pedagogy at the clavichord (including technique, tone production, and interpretation).

A research project proposal I made for the Autumn of 2015 at HSM led to a long period of taking up Agricola's challenge: to improvise keyboard realizations of the solo violin works at the clavichord, exploring the possibilities afforded by the clavichord that are similar to the violin, and those that are not, without resorting to harmonically or texturally expanding the keyboard versions beyond what is *nöthig!*

The process began with playing only the solo violin lines over and over at the clavichord, exploring how the bowing marks could be physicalized. The Giga, in particular (which is still a single-line performance because both hands are needed to realize even the single line!)

¹ Hans-Joachim Schulze, ed., *Bach Dokumente*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Bach-Archiv 1972), 293.

yielded new insights through this process. Its shifting patterns of sixteenth notes are divided by bowing marks much more clearly in the violin solo part than Bach ever marked in his keyboard giges.² The next step was to imagine the implied bass line and write figures for the bass (in movements 1 – 3) and then practice exploring varying the accompaniment in each performance. The Ciaconna is the only movement not improvised, but played from an arrangement made for clavichord by Prof. Edoardo Bellotti of the Eastman School of Music and published by The Organ Academy in Smarano, Italy.

Partita in d minor for solo violin BWV 1004 Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Allemanda
Corrente
Sarabanda
Giga
Ciaconna

Some results exploring the partita with improvised accompaniments were presented in 2017 in a number of concert settings. The work was performed:

Friday May 26, 2017 14:00

Kuopio, Finland as a replacement performer for Wim Winters at *The Nordic Historical Keyboard Festival*

Friday June 16 2017 19:00

Nässjö gamla kyrka as part of the *Orgeldagar på Högländet Festival*.

Thursday August 10, 2017 18:30 and 20:30

As part of the “Milano arte Musica 2017” festival in the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Passione.

Friday August 18, 2017 18:00

Waldkirche zu Timmendorf Strand, Lübeck.

Wednesday October 25, 2017 13:00

As a performance for pedal clavichord as a part of the Göteborg International Organ Academy, 2017.

The recording is a live performance from the August 18th concert recorded by Jan Weinhold and published with his permission.

² See Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2009), for a discussion of polyrhythmic patterns in Bach’s Giges.