

## *Cantabile*

Since the NBA KB V/3 assumes that Bach's use of the term, *cantabile*, is self-evident, it does not bother to define it. Unfortunately, during the past half century, perhaps as a strong reaction to an abundant emphasis on an almost perfect melodic legato achievable on modern keyboard instruments and the persistent performance style that had predominantly existed for almost two centuries, the term seems to have suffered modification to such an extent that *cantabile* has now, among certain circles, come to mean almost the opposite to that which it once had meant to Bach and his contemporaries. A number of musicologists specializing in Baroque performing practice have come to the following conclusions which are not borne out by key sources identified and quoted below:

During the Baroque (and the time of J. S. Bach living in Germany) according to these experts in musicology and performance styles:

1. Legato playing was a special effect just as a staccato style of playing was;
2. Normal style of playing was often something more like a mixture or average of legato and staccato performance styles;
3. The degree of legato used depended on the repertory and instrument: legato for organ style and detached harpsichord style for dance music;
4. A non-legato style was regarded as usual, whereas the legato was normally reserved for long notes and slow movements.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the quotation from Geoffrey Chew's article on *Legato* in the Grove Music Online, Oxford University Press, 2008:

This notion, that legato playing represents an 'ordinary' style of performance rather than a special effect, perhaps originated in the cavatina style of early 19th-century Italian opera and its imitation in Romantic instrumental music, or before that in the cantabile slow-movement styles of the 18th century. In earlier centuries, both legato and staccato styles of playing were normally available as special effects, the normal style of playing and singing often being something between the two: in medieval and Renaissance music, the ligature seems sometimes to have been a prescription of a special legato effect. The degree of legato to be used also depended on repertory and instrument: for example, Diruta (*Il transilvano*, Venice, 1593, 1609) distinguished between a legato organ style and a detached harpsichord style for dance music. For Baroque and early Classical fast movements, a non-legato style was regarded as usual, whereas the legato was normally reserved for long notes and slow movements (C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch*, 1753; Quantz, *Versuch*, 1752, etc.; this style of performance is still called for by Türk, *Clavierschule*, 1804)... For translations from relevant early authorities, see Donington; for useful general advice on legato and staccato in early music, see Badura-Skoda, Ferguson and Keller.

H. Keller: *Phrasierung und Artikulation* (Kassel, 1955; Eng. trans., 1965, 2/1973)

E. and P. Badura-Skoda: *Mozart-Interpretation* (Vienna and Stuttgart, 1957; Eng. trans., 1962/R as *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard*)

R. Donington: *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London, 1963, 5/1992)

H. Ferguson: *Keyboard Interpretation* (London, 1975)

Here are some key sources that provide solid evidence for the proper definition of the term as Bach must have understood it.]

»*Cantabile* (ital.) *cantabile* (gall.) heißt: wenn eine Composition, sie sey vocaliter oder instrumentaliter gesetzt, in allen Stimmen und Partien sich wohl singen lässet, oder eine seine Melodie in solchen führet.«

[From Johann Gottfried Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon*....., Leipzig, 1732]

The following is a translation of this entry, *Cantabile*, in Walther's Music Dictionary (Bach sold copies of this book from his house in Leipzig and very likely contributed to it in a number of ways such as adding entries and helping with editing its contents):

“*Cantabile* from the Italian or *cantabile* from the French describes the nature or characteristic of a composition, whether composed for voices or instruments, when all of its voices or parts can be easily [or beautifully] sung, or when one of the melodies of such a composition have been set [or composed] in such a [vocally, easily singable] manner.”

In the same dictionary, Walther equates *Legato* with *Bindung* (a ‘binding’ or ‘tying’ together of notes), a primary characteristic of vocal music. Just as a vocalist (and wind instrumentalist) must find places to breathe, so also a keyboardist should not play everything that is unmarked [no marks of articulation] in a continuous *legato*, but rather look for the phrases into which a melody can logically be broken, just as a singer would in order to take a breath. It should be remembered, however, that singers in Bach's day did strive and achieve the ability to sing long melodies without taking a single breath. Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) reported that he had heard Georg Heinrich Bümler (1669-1745) at the Hamburg Opera sing a trill for 20 measures without taking a breath!

Without actually using the term, *cantabile*, Johann Mattheson describes a desired manner of playing a keyboard instrument by using the German equivalents for this term:

das singende Wesen (the singing nature/essence)

die Sing-Art or die singende Art (the singing manner)

das fließende aneinanderhängende Wesen (the flowing, one-element/note-connected-to-another nature)

die Melodie mitsingen (singing along inwardly the melody)

Here is the context as given in Johann Mattheson's *Kleine General-Baß-Schule* (Hamburg, 1735, pp. 48-49, 51):

## Zweite Anzeige

### Von der Lehr-Art überhaupt.

#### §. 4.

Besser ist es dannenhero, man wende etwa ein halbes Jahr auf gute ausgesuchte Hand-Sachen, [die in Kupffer gestochene Werke von Kuhnau, Händel, Graupner, Telemann, Mattheson und Bach] und folge dabey meinem überhaupt gegebenen Rath, so lange/ bis sich ein bequemerer findet. Ich bin gut dafür, es soll sich der Aug augenscheinlich und mit vielem Vergnügen spühren lassen. Weiterhin wollen wir diese Lehr-Art genauer untersuchen, und ordentliche Anweisung dazu geben.

#### §. 5.

Umgekehrt gehen wahrlich alle diejenigen zu Werke, welche das singende Wesen nur beiherführen/ oder wol gar nachholen wollen. Der General-Baß selbst muß beihergeführt und alsdenn recht angefangen werden, wenn man schon viele Melodien und deren Zusammenhang begriffen hat; auch solche, mit einer zierlichen Art, herauszubringen weiß. Dadurch hat man siebenderley Nutzen. **Erstlich** wird das Clavier vollkommen bekannt, und dürffen die Tasten nicht alle Augenblick gefragt werden: Bist du es? bist du es? Fürs **andre** werden alle Noten, samt deren Geltung/ die Puncte, Pausen/ ja selbst die Signaturen oder Bezeichnungen/ dem Grunde nach, vorgängig dadurch erlernt und eingesehen. Fürs **dritte** ist die Ordnung und Abwechselung der Finger auch dadurch festgesetzt, die manchem so schwer ankömmt, und sich bey den trucknen Griffen des General-Basses gar schlecht von selbst gibt/ gleichwol bey der linken Hand so höchst nöthig ist. **Viertens** hat man schon, zum wenigsten, zween gezeichnete Schlüssel im Kopf, welches ein Grosses ist, und die Zahl derselben, bey Erlernung des General-Basses, merklich vermindert. Zum **fünfften** bringet man sich einen Begriff von allerhand Tacten und Mensuren zu wege. Zum **sechsten** werden die meisten und gewöhnlichsten Griffe, nebst allen Zonen und deren Haupt-Accorden/ bereits unvermerckt vorgekommen seyn; diese mögen nun auf einem Schlag, oder gebrochen, angebracht werden, und ist zumahl das letztere auch leichter, als das erste. **Endlich** und **siebendens** (welches das vornehmste) gewehnet man sich vom Anfange her zur Melodie oder Sing-Art, zum Gesange, zum fließenden aneinanderhängendem Wesen; welches aus dem bloßen General-Baß nun und in alle Ewigkeit nicht zu erlernen stehet/ bey dessen Ausübung jedoch unaussetzlich und unentbehrlich erfordert wird.

#### §. 12.

. . . Was aber den General-Baß betrifft/ so ist unumgänglich nöthig, daß einer die Haupt-Melodie dessen, so er accompagnirt/ verstehe, und vor Augen habe; es sey nun, daß er sie mitzusingen/ oder, auf eine singende Art, mitzuspielen wisse: denn/ ich bleibe einmahl und allemahl bey diesem Wahlspruche: **Wer nicht singen kann/ der kann auch nicht spielen.** Es muß gesungen seyn, und sollte es auch nur in Gedancken geschehen.

## Second Report

### About the Teaching Method Generally

#### § 4

For this reason it is better to spend about a half year of your time studying and playing select musical compositions which you always have handy [these should include printed keyboard music by Kuhnau, Handel, Graupner, Telemann, Mattheson and Bach] and following generally the advice I have given until something more suitable comes along. I am good with that; it is important that the usefulness of such a new method be apparent and that you can sense a lot of enjoyment while employing it. In the future we will then examine such a method more closely and give proper instruction on how to use it.

#### § 5

All those methods which only treat the singing quality as secondary, or even go as far as wanting to make up for omitting it only by adding it to the end as an afterthought later on, approach this task in the wrong manner. The instruction in figured bass must be introduced and properly begun when a student already has understood many melodies and their interconnections, and even knows how to bring out/express these in a delicate manner. If this is done, you, the student, will derive a sevenfold benefit from this: 1. You will have the keyboard thoroughly under control so that you will not need to ask about any key that you depress: Are you the right one, or are you the one?; 2. Beforehand you will have had to learn from the ground up and understand all of the different notes, along with their values, the dotted values, rests, even the key signatures or designations; 3. The proper placement of the fingers and the changes in fingering will also become firm through such prior practice. This is something that is difficult for some students and does not appear on its own when trying use the proper finger-placement while otherwise playing mechanically (dryly) the chords demanded by the figured-bass, and yet such mastery in playing figured-bass is a requirement of the highest order particularly in regard to the use of the left hand; 4. You will have at least two designated keys memorized, which is in itself already a great accomplishment, and this will reduce considerably the number of keys that need to be mastered while learning how to play figured-bass; 5. You will have obtained a concept of all sorts of time signatures and measure types; 6. Most of the common fingerings and/or finger placements along with all the keys and the main chords associated with them will already have occurred unnoticeably. These can now be immediately applied as solid or arpeggiated chords, the latter method certainly being easier than the former; 7. And, finally, (that which is the most important benefit of all) you will have become accustomed from the very beginning to playing melodically or acquiring the ability to play as if you were singing so as to achieve the manner of playing similar to the singing human voice, i.e., having the characteristic or nature of flowing movement as well as connectedness, which is something that cannot be learned simply from playing figured-bass now or until the end of time and yet is something, the use of which, in the practice of figured-bass, is absolutely required on a continuous basis and is indispensable.

#### § 12

...however, in regard to playing figured-bass, it is inevitably necessary that a figured-bass performer must understand the main melody which he has before him and which he is to accompany. He must know this main melody so well that he can either sing it as he plays the figured-bass, or accompany it in a singing manner; for I, once and for all, remain steadfast behind this motto: **Whoever cannot sing, also cannot play.** Singing is necessary, even if you only imagine this singing voice in your mind. [End of translation]

A good definition of *cantabile* is found in a book, *Anleitung zur Singkunst* (*Instruction in the Art of Singing*), Berlin, 1757, by Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720-1774), who as a university student also studied music and performance of keyboard instruments under Bach and whom Bach used to assist him in the performances of his cantatas and generally as an accompanist in the *Collegium Musicum* of Leipzig.

On pp. 50-51, Agricola states:

Hier gebe ich dem Sangmeister nur noch die nöthige Erinnerung, daß er ja Acht habe, damit die Töne, von dem Schüler, gehörig mit einander verbunden und zusammen gehänget werden mögen. Dieses geschieht, wenn man den vorhergehenden Ton so lange klingen läßt, bis der folgende anspricht: damit nichts Leeres dazwischen vernommen werde; wenn es nicht die Vorschrift des Componisten, es sey durch Pausen oder Abstoßungszeichen, oder die Nothwendigkeit Athem zu schöpfen, ausdrücklich verlanget. Gemeiniglich machen Anfänger, nach jeder Note, zumal wenn ein Sprung darauf folget, welchen sie sich nicht recht zu treffen getrauen, einen kleinen Stillstand. Hieraus kann eine üble Gewohnheit erwachsen, welcher also bey Zeiten vorgebauet, und dagegen der Grund zu einer der größten Unnehmlichkeiten des Singens geleyet werden muß.

[„Here I will remind the voice teacher of just one more thing that he should pay attention to when instructing a voice student: make certain that the notes that the student produces are properly connected and arranged as a series of tones. This can happen, when you allow the previous tone/note to be sustained [to sound] until the sound of the next one begins. This is done this way so that no emptiness [hiatus] between notes can be perceived, unless, of course, the composer has indicated otherwise by indicating rests or staccato, or it becomes absolutely necessary to take a breath between notes. The common mistake that beginners make is to insert tiny breaks after each note, particularly if an interval leap occurs right after the note. This can become a terrible habit, which, if preventive measures had been taken in time, could have been avoided. By correcting this habit, the singer will acquire a firm foundation that will provide for one of the most pleasant aspects of singing.”]

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