

Johann Sebastian Bach: Concerti, Capriccio & Aria - Nel gusto italiano

Notes by **Luca Della Libera**

Johann Sebastian Bach (Eisnach, 1685 – Leipzig, 1750) spent a lifetime transforming, modifying and developing his own work and that of his contemporaries and predecessors. It was through transcription and arrangement that the young Bach approached the gamut of traditions he had set out to assimilate, and analyze. His use of parody, or the practice of borrowing from earlier pieces or the pieces of others while enhancing them with new texts and contexts, characterized his later years in Leipzig (1723 – 1750). While in the former the two might be referred to as arrangement and transcription, in the latter they become wholly new versions, both inspired by the idea that personal style can only evolve through a long process of assimilation. Throughout his extraordinary career as a composer, Bach never tired of copying by hand the music of others, and the sense of eclecticism that would drive him to reproduce Frescobaldi and adapt works by Pergolesi was his way of achieving a very personal synthesis and creation, where abstract speculation, poetry and didactic pursuit would find their place.

The circumstances that sparked Bach's intense interest in Italian instrumental music were most particular. Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar (1696 – 1715), at whose court Bach labored from 1708 – 1717, contributed significantly to the composer's interest in the repertoire. He travelled to the Netherlands in 1713, where he came in contact with blind organist Jan Jakob de Graff who was accustomed to transcribing Italian concertos for the organ. It is interesting to note that Amsterdam had become the centre of music printing in Europe, and the prince had acquired numerous scores for his court orchestra, among which the twelve concertos of Vivaldi's Op. 3, published in the Dutch city in 1711 and entitled *L'Estro Armonico (Harmonic Inspiration)*. Upon his return, the prince's fascination for Italian concertos would give rise to a burgeoning of the genre at court in Weimar. As a dilettante composer, he would write several pieces for the orchestra's repertoire while Bach, as organist at court, devoted himself to transcribing concertos for the keyboard.

This aptly coincides with what we know to be Bach's different interests during his years in Weimar, at a time when he concentrated mainly on music for the keyboard, specifically the organ. In essence, the assimilation of the Italian style stems from a sort of dialogue between various musical genres. The Italian concerto style was widely influential even after Bach had taken his leave from

Weimar, and its underlying concept would leave no part of his repertoire untouched.

In the first significant biography written about Bach, which describes his relationship with Vivaldi, Johann Nicolaus Forkel writes in 1802:

“There must be order, connection, and proportion in the thoughts, and that to attain such objectives, some kind of guide was necessary. Vivaldi’s concertos for the violin, which were then just published, served him for such a guide. He so often heard them praised as admirable compositions that he conceived the happy idea of arranging them all for his clavier. He studied the chain of ideas, their relation to each other, the variations of the modulations, and many other particulars. The change necessary to be made in the ideas and passages composed for the violin, but not suitable to the clavier, taught him to think musically; so that after his labor was completed, he no longer needed to expect his ideas from his fingers, but could derive them from his own fancy.”

This famous quotation is of paramount importance and the exclusive reference to Vivaldi significant as he was doubtless the single most influential composer in the creative evolution of Johann Sebastian Bach, who also studied and transcribed the music of other Italian composers such as Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello, Arcangelo Corelli and Giuseppe Torelli. To this day, the Bach-Vivaldi relationship remains obscure from a biographical and professional standpoint.

No one knows whether they knew one another personally, but the great Italian composer was well-known in Germany as early as 1706 when many of his musical manuscripts were already in circulation. Bach most certainly used the above-mentioned Amsterdam edition (1711) for several of his transcriptions, though we know that German libraries housed written copies of the collection. More is known about Vivaldi’s attachment to Dresden, since he composed several instrumental pieces for Johann Georg Pisendel (1687 - 1755), who led the court orchestra.

Considered to be the greatest German violinist of his time, Pisendel, became acquainted with Bach in 1709 in Weimar; he also studied with Vivaldi, returning from a one-year stay in Venice, 1716 - 1717, with several of the Venetian Maestro’s manuscripts in hand only to become the prime mover of the Vivaldi cult in Germany. *Concerto in F major* BWV 978 is after Vivaldi’s Op. 3, No.3, RV 310; and *Concerto in G major* BWV 973 is from Op. 5, Book 2, No. 2, RV 464, published in Amsterdam sometime between 1716 - 1717. *Concerto in D minor* BWV 974 is taken from Alessandro Marcello’s *Oboe Concerto in D minor*, which is part of a collection of *Five Concertos* from different composers, published in 1717, while the *Concerto in C minor* BWV 981 is from the second of the *Five Concertos*, Benedetto Marcello’s Op. 1 for two oboes, or flutes, two violins, viola, bass, bassoon and harpsichord, published in Venice in 1708.

Forkel’s reference to “thinking musically” is most pertinent, regardless that his real intention was to emphasize Bach’s interest in Vivaldi as a direct benefit to his work as a composer for keyboard. On the one hand, this means considering a musical idea independent of its instrumental performance; holding it as a pure musical value that can be reproduced and modified by different instruments. On the other hand, it refers more to the assimilation of note structures and the

means through which they are put into a greater musical setting than it does to the notion of *ars inveniendi*; or the study of composition technique, harmony and counterpoint, melody and rhythm.

This functional approach was new to the history of composition, and it infiltrated and enhanced Bach's musical inventiveness. His transcriptions constitute an analytical approach that reduces the complex landscape of an orchestral score to a more generic space instrumentally, while remaining effective for analytical purposes.

The musical technique of the Vivaldi concertos, which lays the foundation for the more general concept of "concerto", is based on antithetical systems affecting timbre (*tutti/solo*), tone (*harmonic stability/modulations*), movement (*slow/fast*), and stylistic patterns and expression (*chordal/contrapunctual*). The compositional strategy of the Italian concerto, codified and systematized by Arcangelo Corelli (composer known personally by Bach as attested by his Fugue BWV 589), provided a major breakthrough to the organizational difficulties presented in instrumental music, devoid as it is of all semantic content, and its ultimate emancipation from vocal repertoire. The development of the compositional antithesis as well as the use of basic tonal harmony contribute to a high degree of credibility within the Vivaldi concertos and explain why Bach's encounter with Vivaldi's work profoundly affected his way of thinking about music.

In 1839, Carl Czerny drew attention to *Capriccio sopra la lontananza de il suo fratello diletteissimo* (Capriccio on the Absence of his Most Beloved Brother) BWV 992. This is a programmatic piece in that each of its six parts is accompanied by a title: 1: Arioso: Adagio. *Ist eine Schmeichelung der Freunde, um denselben vor seiner Reise abzuhalten* (Friends gather and try to dissuade him from departing); 2: *Ist eine Vorstellung unterschiedlicher Casuum, die ihm in der Fremde könnten vorkommen* (They tell him of the various misfortunes that may befall him abroad); 3: Adagiosissimo. *Ist ein allgemeines Lamento der Freunde* (The general lament of his friends); 4. *Allhier kommen die Freunde (weil sie doch sehn, dass es anders nicht sein kann) und nehmen Abschied* (His friends come, since they see that it must be, and take leave of him); 5. The Aria of the Postillon; 6. Fugue in imitation of the Postillon's horn. In addition to being divided into various episodes, the piece can be broken down into two very similar sections: one containing the three first, the other the three last. Each part ends with a relatively long section: the first with a tribute to the Italian *topos of lament* - a descending quarter-tone scale, here set to chromatic passages -, the second with a whimsical fugue imitating the postillon's horn. Traditionally, the *Capriccio* is considered to mark a family event, the departure of Bach's brother, Johann Jacob, who was appointed oboist in the National Guard of King Charles XII of Sweden. His composition dates circa 1704, an assumption based on the unauthenticated replacement of the word "fratro" in the title of the manuscript to the more commonly used "fratello", or brother.

According to Christoph Wolff, an authority on this piece by Bach, the term did not necessarily indicate a family relationship but rather a friendship, something akin to the ties he shared with Georg Erdmann, a former and beloved school friend from his time at Luneburg. His assumption is based on the fact that the word "fratello" is found in Bachian documents referring to Erdmann, but also on the observation that the *Capriccio* is devoid of the martial references present in similar pieces such as "alla battaglia", and that the picturesque departure of a

recruit and his carriage as described in the last movement does speak to an unbridled imagination. Wolff surmises that the piece might have been written earlier than 1704 and in the aim of “celebrating the end of school among friends”.

With the *Clavier-Übung* project (“Keyboard Practice”), published between 1731 and 1741, Bach returned to the craft of his youth, that of keyboard virtuoso, and determined to make his compositions in this repertoire public. His approach to the project was systematic on two levels: it made use of keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord with two manuals and the grand organ without pedals, and employed a wide range of musical styles, genres and forms. After the first part, composed of six *Partitas* BWV 825-830 and published in Leipzig in 1731, the second part, published in Nuremberg in 1735, presents the *Concerto in the Italian Style* BWV 971 and the *Overture in the French Style* BWV 831. The third, published in Leipzig in 1739, is comprised of several Preludes for the organ, while the fourth, published in Nuremberg in 1741, features an *Air and Variations* known as the *Goldberg Variations*. The second part of *Clavier-Übung* is something of a diptych, which through various stylistic gestures approaches two major musical cultures: the Italian with its three-movement structure and a compositional form identical to that used in transcription; and the French, the most salient characteristics of which are dance rhythms and a very sophisticated ornamentation. In a sense, the *Concerto* completes a circle that began with the Weimar-era Concertos for harpsichord; it is the final stage in a process of stylistic osmosis now brought to utter perfection.

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