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*The Relationship  
between Notation and Performance  
in the Keyboard Compositions  
of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.  
A Composer's Specific Attempt  
to Communicate with Performers  
and Listeners*

The emergence at the height of the Enlightenment of such a style as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Empfindsamkeit* is one of the paradoxes surrounding the ideas of the Berlin School. At a time when Europe was pervaded by empiricism and reason, there appears in the Berlin School an attempt to find, in the aesthetic of the affects, individual features that could be presented on the level of compositional process. This gives us certain grounds for dubbing this school 'pre-Romantic'.

The central key to eighteenth-century thinking about the aesthetics of music is the notion of musical expression. This is, of course, a phenomenon which is difficult to systematically define – contrary to the formal musical analysis of a work, in which the principles of form delineate a clear way to proceed, albeit occasionally not devoid of deviations and exceptions. The music of the second half of the eighteenth century, mainly in Germany and in France, elaborated its own ways of interpreting, somewhat different to those which were present earlier in music, and which were based on the notion of expression.

From the sociological point of view, all art, and music in particular, was for the eighteenth century primarily embellishment. Perceived in terms of refined sensibility, emotionality, the art of music was often given the epithet *galant*, and its chief determinants, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century, were expression, proportion, gallantry and naturalness. Nature, which was supposed to be merely imi-

tated, was in fact clarified, controlled by the artist thanks to the possibilities afforded him by the formal and expressive means comprising the composition as a whole. The composer sought to define the means employed as specifically as possible, that they might serve solely the given situation accompanying the creation of a particular work. In this way, the whole aesthetic of this period was geared towards the creation of a specific 'code' that would be clear to the composer, the performer and the listener, defining a specific expressional embodiment. Also in the domain of teaching, this fact entailed the elaboration of methods enabling the skills of understanding and employing this code to be transferred to a pupil (e.g. the methods contained in the theoretical works of Johann Joachim Quantz and C. P. E. Bach).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, however, it led to an extreme refinement of musical taste, making it the binding system, which, based on the subjective feelings and expression specific to each individual, is a priori unstable and ambiguous.

This situation may be examined in practical terms by employing C. P. E. Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* [Ger. orig. *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*]. All the considerations of a theoretical and practical nature contained in this treatise are based on musical expression. The structure of the work clearly reveals a paradox of the eighteenth century – grasping the natural by means of the artificial, formulating ambiguous musical means and significations with perfect explicitness. The composer thus becomes the creator, originator and inventor all in one:

In all matters, I have had in mind chiefly those teachers who have failed to instruct their students in the true foundations of the art. Amateurs who have been misled through false precepts can remedy matters by themselves from my teachings, provided they have already played a great deal of music. Beginners, by the same means, will easily attain a proficiency that they could hardly have believed possible.<sup>2</sup>

A musician's subjective awareness of his own originality most frequently manifests itself in his manner of notation, where we can observe the extent of the inadequacy of the store of available symbols and performance markings, and also of the inventiveness of the creator of the new signs, which arises from his specific creative needs. The greater the precision and aptness in the creation of a new language of notation, the better the performer is able to read and interpret the composer's inten-

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Joachim Quantz in his *On Playing the Flute*, trans. and ed. Edward R. Reilly (New York, 1966) [Ger. orig. *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin, 1752)]; C. P. E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. and ed. William J. Mitchell (New York, 1949) [Ger. orig. *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1753, 1762)].

<sup>2</sup> C. P. E. Bach, 'Foreword to part one', in *Essay*, 29.

tions. Without doubt, there are works which do not require any precision in the defining of details, and their performance without any greater specifications does not alter the character of the composer's intentions. But the same cannot be said of the works for keyboard instruments by C. P. E. Bach (especially with regard to many of his sonatas and fantasias), a good performance of which 'can, in fact, improve and gain praise for even an average composition'.<sup>3</sup> The comprehensibility of C. P. E. Bach's ideas depends on the details and on their correct realisation. Such is the most general conclusion which comes to mind when studying his theoretical work and his keyboard compositions – a conclusion which carries enormous significance for the aesthetic of his times, the second half of the eighteenth century.

In his *Essay*, C. P. E. Bach maintains that a mediocre composition may gain from an excellent performance. A whole dissertation could be written about this alone, but here the basic observation will be the fact that this statement is only true if we assume that the performer will supplement the composition, or, to put it another way, that the work's notation is merely a neutral, intermediate stage leading to its performance; it is just a 'trampoline' in the procedure which, in order to achieve a full and consummate realisation, requires the emotionality and sensibility of the performer. Let us reverse the thinking here and formulate a question appropriate to the aesthetic of the Berlin School: Can a good composition be reduced to mediocrity by a bad performance? The fact that C. P. E. Bach wrote his *Essay* allows us to answer in the affirmative. The performer interpreting a work plays a fundamental role in determining the value of that work and the ultimate effect of the musical process. Many theorists and musicians before C. P. E. Bach emphasised the contribution and the role of the performer, but none placed such a huge emphasis on this stage of the musical presentation, giving the performer a huge set of precise instructions with a precise interpretation of their aesthetical signification. From studying that content of the *Essay* which refers to what creates the specific values of a good performance, one may extract a set of criteria that may be applied in every composition. The question thus arises: What aspects did C. P. E. Bach take account of with the aim of achieving a precise, perfect performance, which at the same time proved possible to notate in the score and codify in theory? The answer, of course, is provided by the *Essay*, which is full of more or less systematised criteria resulting in a good, and therefore true, performance, as the title itself proclaims: *The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*.

It is characteristic that C. P. E. Bach included in the title of his treatise the evaluative notion of the true art. This is certainly a rather prob-

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<sup>3</sup> C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, § 13, 153.

lematic, polemical statement, yet the composer consistently undertakes to clarify it further in numerous passages from this treatise-handbook. He even speaks of the ‘truthfulness of a performance’ as of something universal, commonplace and self-evident – just as he states that: ‘A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved’.<sup>4</sup> The categorical tone that we find on successive pages of the *Essay* obliges and motivates us to seek out those indisputable notational specifications which are apt to ensure a ‘universal truthfulness of performance’.

Before we set off on this ‘quest’, a few crucial remarks would be in order. C. P. E. Bach was, in his day, an ‘isolated’ composer. We may ask, therefore, whether the *Essay* did not constitute an attempt to drag himself out of that isolation, an attempt at a specific communication with performers and listeners? We must keep this in mind. His favourite instrument was the clavichord, which in some sense placed him on the margins of concert life at that time, outside the current musical ‘fashion’ – opera, vocal music and concertos, with the participation of large instrumental ensembles and with the harpsichord front stage. Solo music for keyboard instruments, especially for the clavichord, was in itself a highly specific phenomenon, rather overlooked in musical social life in Germany after 1750. The sociological isolation of his music, both through the nature of the instrument that he used and through the forms and genres he created for it, prevented him from ‘squeezing into’ the ‘musical fashion’. This music constituted a sort of avant-garde of those times and triggered the emergence of a new aesthetic, a new style, which was so heavily dependent on the refinement and sensibility of the performer that it forced C. P. E. Bach into creating solid theoretical foundations and a certain codification. It is here that he would seek his motivation for writing his *Essay*.

The process of the codification of the principles of ‘good and true’ performance in the *Essay* can be presented in two phases:

1. general principles are given concerning the form and proportions of a composition,
2. principles for their application are elaborated, regulating distinguished subcategories of possible cases.

In other words, we may speak of an attempt to create a universal performance practice, in which a limited group of principles is designed to cover all the possible cases which one is likely to encounter in practice. This is an idealised model, since how is it possible to calculate in music all the possible cases of performance? Yet such premises obliged C. P. E. Bach to elaborate quite detailed and consistent notational signs, which would be unambiguously recognisable to the performer:

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<sup>4</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 13, 152.

Performers [...] must try to capture the true content of a composition and express its appropriate affects. Composers, therefore, act wisely who in notating their works include terms, in addition to tempo indications, which help to clarify the meaning of a piece. However, as worthy as their intentions might be, they would not succeed in preventing a garbled performance if they did not also add to the notes the usual signs and marks relative to execution.<sup>5</sup>

And that is exactly what we can observe in the meticulous notation of C. P. E. Bach, which he presented in the *Essay*. Before him, there had been no such precise notation in such an ordered form in music. The composer distinguished the basic aspects of the 'good' performance of a work, which he then further clarified with notation:

The subject matter of performance is the loudness and softness of tones, touch, the snap, *legato* and *staccato* execution, the *vibrato*, arpeggiation, the holding of tones, the retard and *accelerando*. Lack of these elements or inept use of them makes a poor performance.<sup>6</sup>

And so, to get down to the details, four aspects which are afforded special treatment in the *Essay* should be singled out as those conditioning a performance that accords with the intentions of a work's composer. These are fingering, articulation, dynamics and 'the variation of the reprises'.<sup>7</sup>

## Fingering

In the first part of the *Essay*, in the chapter on 'Fingering', C. P. E. Bach postulates the uniform use in playing of all the fingers, clearly breaking from the previous practice, which did not include the thumb. The composer accounted for this previous situation by the fact that priority had hitherto been given to chordal playing, in which the thumb could be dispensed with. In the 'new', contemporary times, however, one encountered such a 'variety of passages' that the use of all the fingers, especially of the right hand, had become a necessity. In this assessment of the music of his times, the author certainly drew on the knowledge and experience he had acquired through studying and performing his father's works for *Clavier*. It is also well known that Johann Sebastian Bach used the thumb when playing. Thus for the first time we have in the *Essay* the stipulated fingering of a work or part of a work. These precise indications were intended to help the performer execute a work adroitly; they also sanctioned the use of the thumb as a fully-fledged 'participant in playing'.

<sup>5</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 16, 153–154.

<sup>6</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 3, 148.

<sup>7</sup> See Etienne Darbellay, 'Bach's Aesthetic as Reflected in his Notation', in *C.P.E. Bach Studies* (Oxford, 1988), 45.

86. §. Ich mache den Anfang bey Anführung einiger besonderer Exempel, unter Fig. LVII.

[Tab. II.] Fig. LVII.



bey (a) das Ueberschlagen des zweyten, bey (b) des dritten und bey (c) des vierten Fingers über den Daumen in Sprüngen zu zeigen. Bey Fig. LVIII.

Example 1. C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, 71, exact fingering of figures

## Articulation

In the third chapter on 'Performance', C. P. E. Bach included and described all the kinds of articulation with which he was familiar, with particular emphasis placed on *détaché* and *legato*. He pointed to the possibility of executing these articulations, assigning to them appropriate notational symbols and singling out particular cases which permitted of a latitude in performance. The composer ends his lengthy considerations with the formulation of a general principle, also giving exceptions allowing for a departure from these rules:

Tones which are neither detached, connected, nor fully held [cases previously examined] are sounded for half their value, unless the abbreviation *Ten.* (hold) is written over them, in which case they must be held fully. Quarters and eighths in moderate and slow tempos are usually performed in this semidetached manner. They must not be played weakly, but with fire and a slight accentuation.<sup>8</sup>

This principle would appear to be set out in a very straightforward manner, and one would indeed have difficulty in finding a case in the music of his times which departed from it. Let us look at a specific example from the oeuvre of C. P. E. Bach: Rondo No. 1 in G major from Book Five 'for connoisseurs and amateurs' (1784, pub. 1785):

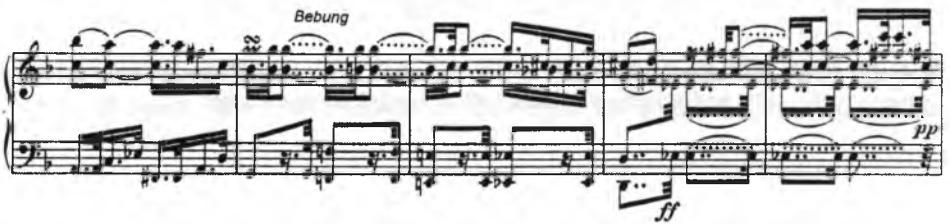
<sup>8</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 22, 157.

Example 2. C. P. E. Bach, Rondo No. 1 in G major from Book Five 'for connoisseurs and amateurs', bars 1-9, articulation markings

This work has a specified tempo: *andante un poco*. The first two bars show an opening motif 'in two acts', with exactly stipulated articulation marks. The closing crotchet is marked *tenuto*, and so we have here the use of the exception noted in the principle presented above. Were it not for the *tenuto* on the crotchet, then according to the principle it would be played as a quaver; but it is marked, and so should be exactly sustained. In these first two bars there is not a single note without specified articulation. Even if there is no marking written, it can be deduced from the principle given above. This same rondo also provides us with further examples of exact notation; in fact, it is 'larded' with information regarding articulation. In bar 3, the series of semi-quavers in the right hand is synchronised with the quavers in the left; the semi-quavers are connected in pairs by a *legato* slur – a type of *appoggiatura*. Indeed, the composer demands in his *Essay* that: 'Passages in which passing notes or *appoggiaturas* are struck against a bass are played *legato* in all tempos even in the absence of a slur'<sup>9</sup> – in this case it is present. An additionally desirable sound is a dissonantal clash with the bass – the collision of a harmonic dissonance. Passages not marked *legato* – besides the case referred to above – should be played *semi-détaché*, that is, half-way between *legato* and *staccato*. The characteristic articulation markings used by the composer also include *Bebung*. This is a marking typical of the clavichord and only possible to execute on that instrument. In the briefest terms, it denotes *vibrato*,

<sup>9</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 18, 155.

which the performer applies by vibrating his fingers on a depressed key, the end of which, in the form of a tangent, is in direct contact with the string. The specificities of the clavichord's mechanism, with the immobile key lever, made it possible to affect the sound and the vibration of the string in such a way as can nowadays be achieved, for example, by playing on the guitar. We come across the marking *Bebung*, for example, in Sonata No. 2 in F major from Book One 'for connoisseurs and amateurs'. The inclusion of this articulation shows that the composer certainly used and wrote works for clavichord at this time:



Example 3. C. P. E. Bach, extract from Sonata No. 2 in F major, movt. I, Andante, from Book One 'for connoisseurs and amateurs', articulation marking *Bebung*

## Dynamics

In his references to dynamics, C. P. E. Bach alluded – albeit quite selectively – to the statements of Quantz. This applies particularly to the combining of dynamic shading with the harmonic structure of a work:

But in general it can be said that dissonances are played loudly and consonances softly, since the former rouse our emotions and the latter quiet them. An exceptional turn of a melody which is designed to create a violent affect must be played loudly. So-called deceptive progressions are also brought out markedly to complement their function. A noteworthy rule which is not without foundation is that all tones of a melody which lie outside the key may well be emphasized regardless of whether they form consonances or dissonances.<sup>10</sup>

This principle generalises, in a way, a distribution of dynamics in a work that clearly relates to the melodic-harmonic elements of a work. All figures are to be highlighted by dynamics. Dissonances cause harmonic disturbances, their accentuation by means of dynamics leads in the direction of a stabilisation of new tonal references, and these changes were

<sup>10</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 29, 163.

used very often by C. P. E. Bach, and that over small spaces. This approach does not require, in part, the use of special notational signs, since the dynamics are contained more in the structural foundations of the composition itself. Despite this, there are works in which the composer resolutely employs dynamic markings. One such example is the Rondo No. 2 in D major from Book Two ‘for connoisseurs and amateurs’:

The image displays a musical score for Rondo No. 2 in D major by C. P. E. Bach. The score is written for piano and is divided into two systems of three staves each. The first system begins with the tempo marking 'poco Adagio' and the dynamic marking 'p'. It transitions to 'Allegretto' with a 'f' marking. The second system continues with 'mf', 'f', and 'p' markings. The third system features 'poco Adagio' and 'Allegretto' markings, along with a 'crescendo' marking. The fourth system includes 'p', 'pp', and 'f' markings. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 4. C. P. E. Bach, Rondo No. 2 in D major from Book Two ‘for connoisseurs and amateurs’, dynamic markings

The simple premise of the aesthetic convention of those times was that dissonance, as broadly understood, brings development to music. This can be seen in the example above: wherever the dissonant sound grows, the dynamic grows as well. Without such a distribution of dynamic-harmonic tensions, there would be 'emotional silence' – and that would be unacceptable to the *Empfindsamer Stil*. Thus dynamics are linked directly to affects, and they differ decidedly from the terraced dynamics of the Baroque, originating from the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth century, which were employed quite arbitrarily and concerned only the 'arrangement' of the loudness of the tones regardless of their affective context. Dynamics of this type are no longer present in the mature works for keyboard instruments by C. P. E. Bach.

### The variation of reprises

C. P. E. Bach was a master of manipulating 'musical moments'.<sup>11</sup> This he practised in order to obtain an immediate, powerful expression. This stood in marked opposition to the smooth, extended formal structures particularly characteristic of composers from the Viennese circle. These manipulations were best exemplified in the area of 'reprises with variation' or 'the variation of the reprises'. This was an area in which the composer was unusually dependent on the interpreter of his music – on the performer. C. P. E. Bach approached this issue in an interesting way in the *Essay*. He placed himself, as composer, in the first place, for two reasons:

1. the practical reason that the status of the 'humble' interpreter in those days was not yet rigidly defined by tradition;
2. he did not want his conception of expression to diverge from that of the interpreter:

Today varied reprises are indispensable, being expected of every performer. [...] Performers want to vary every detail without stopping to ask whether such variation is permitted by their ability and the construction of the piece. Often it is simply the varying, especially when it is allied with long and much too singularly decorated cadenzas, that elicits the loudest acclaim from the audience.<sup>12</sup>

So aiming to 'make an impression' on the audience was common practice. The composer and the performer were collaborators in this 'decorating' of a composition – the former provided the 'raw' material, the latter 'decorated' it beyond recognition. Thus the interpreter's function in those times was closer to that of the composer, as he co-created the work. This

<sup>11</sup> Etienne Darbellay, 'Bach's Aesthetic...', 51.

<sup>12</sup> Foreword to the Berlin edition of the first collection of *Sonatas with Varied Reprises* (1760) (Wq 50. 1–6, H 126, 136–140); see also *Essay*, § 31, 165–166.

is no surprise, particularly given that a composer most frequently performed his music himself. The composer – the producer of a relatively complete ‘message’ – passed it to the performer, who became its proclaimer. The emphasis shifts markedly here towards the expressive interpretation of the work, which should generate a continuous communication between the interpreter and the listener. The responsibility that fell on the shoulders of the performer was twofold: to correctly decode the expression encoded in the work by the composer and to transmit it correctly to the listener. C. P. E. Bach must have trusted his code of notation to bring this about. Yet in some measure he had to submit, since in spite of his considerable efforts, he did not devise an unambiguous method for ‘programming’ the performer as he wished. He found himself entirely in the performer’s hands, and only through his directions, his notational symbols, could he attain, in part, his intended goal. In an attempt to ‘save’ himself, he often gave directions of an overly general kind: ‘Play from the soul, not like a trained bird!’<sup>13</sup>

One can judge the extent to which he was unable to decide on a particular version of a work or part of a work, employing those ‘musical moments’ and their constantly changing repetition, by the fact that even after publishing a composition, he would continue writing further versions:

The image displays a page of handwritten musical notation for C. P. E. Bach's *Six Sonatas with Varied Reprises*. It consists of four systems of staves. The first system has two staves, the second and third have three staves each, and the fourth has two staves. The notation is dense, featuring various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings such as *f*, *ff*, and *pp*. There are also some circled numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) and a question mark (?) scattered throughout the score, likely indicating specific performance instructions or variations. The paper shows signs of age, with some ink bleed-through and slight discoloration.

Example 5. C. P. E. Bach, extract from *Six Sonatas with Varied Reprises* (Wq 50. 1–6, H 126, 136–140), pub. Berlin 1759

<sup>13</sup> C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, § 7, 150.

'Play from the soul, not like a trained bird' – the most terse, and also most general, principle that C. P. E. Bach included in his *Essay*. And it is this principle which best relates to that 'variation of the reprises'. It indicates that principles should be read as indications, which by no means should function as strings restricting the flight of that bird. This flight is a 'trail' of expression through the work that the composer designs for the performer. If, over the course of this flight, there comes a time to change the reprise, then the bird should turn full circle and return to the point at which it previously began to trace the circle. This may be termed the 'expression of a circle', and the Berlin School declared itself in favour of that line – the expressive line along which ran the emotions. As C. P. E. Bach understood it, this 'circle of composition' was such an extension of a composition, such a permissible transformation, which did not lose its contour, but only drew it many times in different colours, applying 'variation of the reprises':

What comprises good performance? The ability through singing or playing to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition. Any passage can be so radically changed by modifying its performance that it will be scarcely recognizable. [...] Good performance, then, occurs when one hears all notes and their embellishments played in correct time with fitting volume produced by a touch which is related to the true content of a piece.<sup>14</sup>

This quotation contains the aesthetic 'key' to the era of *Empfindsamkeit* – not the portrayal of ire, anger or other emotions, but 'the briskness of allegros' or 'the tenderness of adagios'.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

C. P. E. Bach did not notate in his works things that are impossible to perform!

He included as many of the then existing aspects of performance regarded as appropriate as he could, in order to achieve a certain aesthetic (read: expressive) purpose: from *Bebung* to the broadest aspects of articulation, from global dynamics to every single note, he was also the first to begin to notate the exact 'fingering' of a work. Thanks to him, notation took a huge step forward. Its development took a subjective direction, with which he was not always able to cope by formulating strict principles – it was as if the heart was at odds with the mind. He tried to eliminate all vagueness, closing the circle of acceptable 'variation of the reprises' – as if he wanted to decode the vagueness of language, to clarify

<sup>14</sup> C. P. E. Bach, § 2 and § 4, 148.

<sup>15</sup> See Etienne Darbellay, 'Bach's Aesthetic...', 59.

every word. There is no question, however, that he remembered the words of Quantz:

‘Now music is nothing but an artificial language through which we seek to acquaint the listener with our musical ideas’.<sup>16</sup>

These are very significant words – C. P. E. Bach must have realised that he would not create a ‘method of methods’ by means of notation. He ‘broke into’ the world of sounds, but words, of course, have their substitutes, which do not lose the original meaning, do not contradict the original intention – only modify it. A work may be ‘improved’ by a performer, enhanced without its sense, its expressive content, being altered. The advancement of notation that occurred thanks to C. P. E. Bach was intended to enhance the capacity for communication between the composer and the performer and the performer and his audience. The pleasure of creating and of performing music is tied up with both diversity and suitability – emotion can be expressed with an apt expression, but not necessarily the same expression every time. We can provoke with music a ‘flood of tears’ without necessarily drowning noble things in notation.

*Translated by John Comber*

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<sup>16</sup> Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, 120.

