

Bach: The Goldberg Variations



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*Background and genesis**Clavierübung*

Quite what the implications of the curiously unprepossessing term ‘Keyboard Practice’ are is less clear than one might suppose. Players now are used to Studies or *études*, Exercises or *esercizi*, and every child knows that ‘to practise’ means ‘to exercise oneself in the performance of music with the view of acquiring skill’ (OED). Clearly, with the *Goldberg Variations* one does do this, and an English publisher of the time might well have called them *Lessons for the Harpsichord*, when ‘lesson’ suggested written-down music helpful to players, either as practical instruction or as substitutes for compositions and improvisations of their own. But there is another kind of practice, the kind spoken of by lawyers and doctors as they ‘practise a profession’ or ‘put their subject into practice’ or even ‘buy into a practice’: this is practice as distinct from theory.

Musica prattica had been a common term in treatises of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy and in those elsewhere imitating or influenced by them, treatises applying the rules of harmony and counterpoint for the creating of actual, written-down music. When in 1689 Johann Kuhnau – uncommonly for the time, a university graduate (Leipzig, in law) and not averse to literary conceits – came to publish a set of seven harpsichord suites in his university town, he seems to have coined the term *Clavier-Übung* as a German equivalent of the venerable Italian term. After all, the volume would instruct the buyer not only in keyboard dexterity but in the practical application of musical theory, in so far as each suite gave an example of the major keys (C, D, E, F, G, A and B \flat) rather than the old modes or tones, and recognized the seven notes of the scale (rather than the six of ancient hexachordal theory) as the basis of harmony as currently understood and applied. A further set of seven suites followed

in 1692, now in the minor (C, D, E, F, G, A, B), the two books thus ‘fixing’ the idea of the diatonic keys, the majors and minors. Kuhnau’s music itself may not rank with the suites of older German composers like Buxtehude or, much less, Froberger, but in its way was instructive and usefully up to date.

Some other composers older than Bach used the term *Clavier-Übung*, notably Johann Krieger in 1698 (Nuremberg) and Johann Christoph Bach in 1709 (the ‘Gehren cantor’ Bach, in a manuscript compilation). Although these and perhaps others were probably following Kuhnau, one can suppose that when the term was used in later publications – by Vincent Lübeck in 1728 (Hamburg), G. A. Sorge in 1739 (Nuremberg), J. C. Graupner (Darmstadt *c.* 1730) and J. L. Krebs (three parts, Nuremberg) – it was J. S. Bach who was the inspiration. From Krieger on, the term could have been understood to cover a wide variety of music for a wide variety of keyboard instruments, and it is possible that Bach too used it with a long-term plan in mind to survey as many as he could of the more elevated genres of keyboard music. But only suppositions can be made from his volumes, none of which, rather surprisingly for the time, contained a preface of any kind.

When he turned to publishing his first keyboard works, Bach began with only one, the Partita in Bb, 1726, promising others in an advertisement. This work might be seen as picking up with the key on which Kuhnau’s first series had ended, and one might not be far wrong in supposing that with it Bach was saluting his predecessor, even establishing the right of apostolic succession to him in Leipzig, and achieving it with – would it not have been obvious? – very superior music. Kuhnau had died in 1722, and Bach eventually succeeded him as cantor of St Thomas, having long been familiar with his music and collaborating with him on some major organ-building projects.

Clavierübung I

So ‘Keyboard Practice’ was initiated in 1726 with a single suite, described in an advertisement as ‘the first partita’ of ‘a collection of clavier suites’ (Dok II, pp. 160–1).

The Italian term *partita* had been used by Krieger on a bilingual title page of 1697 as an equivalent to the German term *Partie* (*Sechs*

Musicalische Partien/Sei partite musicali), and Bach too seems to use it in the sense of ‘a part’ or ‘a division’ of a whole, specifically of a volume called ‘Keyboard Practice’. As such, whatever dictionaries now say, *partita* does not mean *suite* without further qualification. In *partien* Kuhnau seems again to have coined a word, taken up by his Leipzig pupil J. C. Graupner (*Partien*, 1718); its singular in Italian Bach had taken to be *Partia* when he compiled his three suites for solo violin. Neither Kuhnau nor Bach had the much earlier Italian term *partita* in mind, for *partite* were variations not suites, indeed an equivalent to the old English word ‘divisions’ for a set of variations. Despite the usual assumptions now made, whether Bach himself ever used the word *partita* either for his sets of chorale-variations for organ (the so-called Chorale Partitas) or for his suites for solo violin (the so-called Violin Partitas) is not certain.

Harpsichord Partitas 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 followed in 1727, 1727, 1728, 1730 and 1730/1, and in 1731 the six were gathered together as a set and published. Note that while the individual suites had been published as *Clavierübung . . . Partita 1 [etc.]*, the composite title says nothing about partitas:

Clavir Übung bestehend in Praeludien, Allemanden, Couranten, Sarabanden, Gigueen, Menuetten, und andern Galanterien; Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths Ergoetzung verfertiget von Johann Sebastian Bach. Hochfürstl: Sächsisch-Weisenfelsischen würcklichen Capellmeistern und Directore Chori Musici Lipsiensis. Opus I. In Verlegung des Autoris. 1731

Keyboard practice consisting of Preludes, Allemandes, Courantes, Sarabandes, Giges, Minuets and other *galanteries*. Prepared for the soul’s delight of music-lovers by Johann Sebastian Bach, at present capellmeister to His Highness the Prince of Saxe-Weissenfels and Director of the Choristers, Leipzig. Opus I. Published by the author. 1731

One of the two engravers, music students working for a Leipzig printer (see account in Butler, ‘The Engraving’), was much more skilled than the other.

The sequence of keys is more complex and symmetrical than Kuhnau’s, or of course Bach’s own step-by-step sequence in the *Well-tempered Clavier* of 1722, and produces a wedge-like pattern of tonics:

Bb major, C minor, A minor, D major, G major, E minor

No French books of harpsichord music had their keys as systematically planned as this, nor for such secular music did they follow the order of church tones (I, II, III = D minor, G minor, A minor, etc.), as they often did in the *Livres d'orgue*. Each partita has seven movements except for No. 2, though this could also be counted as having seven (the long opening movement of No. 2 has a slow section, unlike the prelude and fugue found in two other partitas). Six movements from each of Nos. 3 and 6 had appeared as suites in the *Anna Magdalena Book* of 1725, made there evidently from a yet earlier copy and left without title.¹ I do not know exactly where Bach's term *Galantierien* for the less formal suite-dances came from, but this or a cognate tends to occur when theorists (such as Brossard in 1703 or Mattheson in 1739) described or categorized the varieties of musical styles, high and low.

Variety is certainly an aim of *Clavierübung Opus I*, but within the tight confines of a conventional and narrow genre. While no two Allemandes or Courantes or Sarabandes or Gigue in the set of six are quite alike, they could not be anything else. My impression is that no two even have the same tempo. Such an approach produces not only strikingly original conceptions (e.g. the Correntes in Nos. 1 and 3) but movements in which familiar conventions take on a wonderfully idealized form (e.g. the French Courantes in Nos. 2 and 4, the Italian Correntes in Nos. 5 and 6). Like Kuhnau's *Partien*, each begins with a prelude, and each prelude is distinct in genre, form, style, texture and even in name. The different titles, some of them less than obviously appropriate (Sinfonia in Partita No. 2, Fantasia in No. 3, Praeambulum in No. 5), recall Johann Mattheson's in his *Pièces de clavecin* (London, 1714), not least as the opening movements of Nos. 3 and 6 had been called merely *Prélude* in their earlier versions. Though far from being great or even at times competent pieces, Mattheson's had been the last notable German publication of suites, except for Handel's so-called *Eight Great Suites* (London, 1719/20), which too had rung the changes rather less systematically. In addition to the Six Partitas' incomparable quality, it is their *systematic* variety that is so striking and of course typical of all four volumes of *Clavierübung*, each of which has its own *system*.

A major challenge is to find likely influences behind the Six Partitas, for however original and sophisticated, J. S. Bach was a composer who

knew, thought about and reacted to a great deal of music, far more than documents reveal. Was he familiar with such recent books as Handel's of 1719/20, Couperin's *Troisième Livre* of 1722 and, in particular, Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* of 1724? Take one striking detail: eight of Couperin's fifty-four movements in the book of 1722 are in 2/4 time, the new Italian metre which had not yet appeared in any of Bach's suite-compilations, for keyboard, for violin or for cello.² But the Six Partitas now include three examples of this metre, all with Italian titles of questionable aptness – Capriccio, Scherzo, Aria – and it must remain possible that Couperin's book was treated as a guide to modern tastes, as indeed it deserves to be. In the same connection, it is significant that there had been no 2/4 Scherzo in the early version of the A minor Partita; and its Burlesca, which was first called Menuet, perhaps owed its name-change to the unusual rubric used by Couperin for one of the pieces in his *Troisième Livre*: 'dans le goût burlesque'.

One also needs to bear in mind less major composers, such as J. G. Graun (violin teacher of Wilhelm Friedemann in the mid-1720s), whose sonatas published in *c.* 1726 include many movements in 2/4 time. Also, the farther back any apparent allusion or imitation goes – for example, the Gigue of No. 3 seems to develop a fugue-type found in a sonata of Adam Reinken, 1687, transcribed by Bach (BWV 965) – the likelier that it would be updated or somehow built upon for the new publication. Or the poorer the influential music, the more it would be re-conceived: the wonderfully high seriousness and harmonic tension of No. 2's opening Sinfonia might be a creative response to the puny *Symphonie* of Mattheson's Suite No. 10. So might the unique Capriccio of No. 2 be to the violinistic figures in sonatas by J. G. Graun. Various galant touches in No. 5, the most modern of the partitas, might also be imaginative reactions to near-banalities in Graun's modishly galant opus. Nor should one forget that Bach must always have had his own music in mind: one can see the Air in Partita No. 6 or even the startlingly original Corrente of No. 1 as maturer versions of movements in the recent French Suites for harpsichord. Even the relentless Gigue of the E minor Partita, a source in modern times for much speculation on jiggled rhythms in general and circle time-signatures in particular, could well be viewed as an 'extended' version of the simpler Gigue of the French Suite in D minor.

Rameau's second book of *Pièces de clavecin* (1724) was without rival at the time for both its musical and its didactic qualities, and while there is no documented evidence that J. S. Bach knew it, nor is there that he had once known the organ volumes of Louis Marchand and André Raison from which he seems to have borrowed themes. Is it not possible that, to take one example, the unique Gigue of the B \flat major Partita is responding to Rameau's remarks about hand-crossing in which

la main gauche passe pardessus la droite, pour toucher alternativement la Basse & le Dessus. Je crois que ces dernières batteries me sont particulières, du moins il n'en a point encore paru de la sorte; & je puis dire en leur faveur que l'œil y partage le plaisir qu'en reçoit l'oreille.

the left hand passes above the right, to play bass and treble in alternation. I think that these latter *batteries* are particular to myself, at least nothing of the kind has yet appeared in print, and I can say in their favour that the eye shares in the pleasure that the ear has of them.

– the last remark surely striking a chord with Bach? In the case of No. 5, there is a further possible connection. Published in 1730, it must have been the last to be composed, musically the most modern of the six. But by then, Rameau's newer book (1728/9) had also appeared, and No. 5 shows various signs of responding – indeed, immediately responding – to these up-to-the-minute French pieces. This is a topic worth exploring elsewhere, but several details are suggestive. For example, Rameau's new book may have suggested a puzzling and unique bit of notation in Partita No. 5: the double stemming of its cross-beat Minuet, a movement of pared-down simplicity and pseudo-naivety worthy of the French master himself. One wonders whether all this was for the benefit of Wilhelm Friedemann, then nineteen or twenty years old.

I doubt if all the scope, all the levels of variety in the Six Partitas have yet been recognized. For example, one can long be familiar with No. 5 before appreciating that its movements are all in triple time, necessitating some ingenuity in the case of the Allemande, which by definition has four beats:

Praeambulum: 3/4, moderato, metre ambiguous at first

Allemande: 4/4, with triplets (so as if 24/16)

Corrente: 3/8

Sarabande: 3/4, poco andante

Tempo di Minuetta: 3/4, but simultaneously 6/8

Passepied: 3/8

Gigue: 6/8, a steadier 6/8 (so as if $2 \times 3/8$)

These three levels of triple time – long, short and compound – even resemble the medieval categories of mode, time and prolation, not perhaps wittingly but in so far as three levels of triple time (slow, ordinary, fast) have traditionally been recognized as having three distinct characters. Seven movements in seven different shades of triple time suggest not only deliberate planning but an intimate grasp of music's nature, as one might expect of this composer.

But in any case, the Six Partitas are not merely collections of clever ideas or, in the case of No. 6, a rather distancing thoroughness. There are also the harmonic sensuousness of the E minor Sarabande, the unending melody of the D major Allemande, the uncanny verve of the C minor fugue, the sheer charm of the B \flat Minuets, and so much else. It is striking how the very opening piece of all four volumes of 'Keyboard Practice' exposes the listener to sounds totally unknown before.

Clavierübung II

An advertisement for No. 5 of *Clavierübung I* mentions two further partitas to come (Dok II, p. 202), but there was only one. So it seems that a seventh partita, presumably to match the original plan of Johann Kuhnau's *Clavier-Übung*, was never composed or completed; or it was, but it became the Overture in B minor, BWV 831, apparently a revised version of an Overture in C minor; or it was, and it turned out to be not a suite but the Italian Concerto in F major, BWV 972. Of those possibilities, the last fits the key-plan best: F major is the key next in line to *Clavierübung I*'s sequence of B \flat c a D G e. Although logically one might expect F minor to be next, those six notes themselves produce a major scale whose tonic is resoundingly confirmed with the very first chord of the Italian Concerto – in fact, the very next chord Bach published. If this is a coincidence, it is a remarkable and very musical one!

So the two works BWV 972 (Italian concerto) and 831 (French suite) constitute *Clavierübung II*, published in 1735:

Zweyter Theil der Clavier Übung bestehend in einem Concerto nach Italiaenischen Gusto und einer Overture nach Französischer Art, vor ein Clavicymbel mit zweyen Manualen. Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths-Ergötzung verferdiget . . .

Second Part of Keyboard Practice, consisting of a Concerto according to Italian taste and an Overture according to the French manner, for a harpsichord with two manuals, prepared for the soul's delight of music-lovers . . .

Not the least interesting detail here is the specifying of two manuals. This was not because they are necessary, as with organ trios; nor are they for the sake of a melody in long notes that has somehow to stand out, as with organ chorales; nor are they practically desirable for hand-crossing, as in the *Goldberg* (though there they are not absolutely obligatory either, as modern pianists know). Rather, two manuals are specified in order to allow *forte–piano* changes, dynamic contrasts of the kind now desired by up-to-date musicians owning one of the fashionable two-manual harpsichords, even perhaps one of the new fortepianos whose loud–soft had somehow to be imitated.

One could have played at least the preludes of the earlier Partitas 2, 4 and 6 with two manuals, but they are not specified there in *Clavierübung I* any more than they are in major organ works of the time. The same goes for a putative early version of the Italian Concerto's first movement (see below) and for Bach's earlier transcriptions for harpsichord of concertos by Vivaldi and others. In those transcriptions, the composer or a copyist might occasionally write in *f* and *p* signs to draw attention to echo passages, meanwhile leaving it also quite practical (if one did happen to have a two-manual instrument, that is) to change manuals for other reasons – such as to distinguish the *tutti* themes from the *solo* episodes typical of Italian concertos.

Sources suggest that both works in *Clavierübung II* originated some time before the print, the C minor version of the Overture having been copied by Anna Magdalena from an autograph score. The idea of so contrasting Italian and French styles was very much to the taste of the day

amongst knowledgeable German musicians, and one finds it too with Handel. The contrast is borne out even at the end of each piece in *Clavierübung II*, for the first is marked *Il fine*, the second *Fin*. This is found in the second edition of 1736 (the first had only the *Fin*) and suggests that someone had carefully corrected it. Humour, perhaps, or pedantry? Or a merely earnest fidelity to imaginary models? Certainly the 2/4 metre of the opening movement of *Clavierübung II* was an Italian allusion, as was even the absence of a tempo-sign for it such as *Allegro*, since Venetian concertos too were often without one for an opening movement.³

In the event, however, the Italian Concerto, described by one contemporary as a perfect model of the well-designed concerto for single instrument (Dok II, p. 373), differs in major respects from actual Italian concertos of the kind that Bach had transcribed. The shape of the outer movements is more regular than Vivaldi's; in the print, the contrasts between solo *concertino* and chorus *ripieno* are explicitly scored for two manuals as never in the (much earlier) surviving transcriptions; and a strict 'Bachian' symmetry seems to be operating throughout. This last shows itself in the way the three movements seem to have been calculated and notated so as to have the same pulse: a 2/4 crotchet = a 3/4 andante quaver which = a 2/2 presto minim. In practice, this would mean playing the first movement less fast, with more deliberation, than commonly heard now. But so one ought to play a 2/4 movement. As for the idiom itself, although the *piano* solo episodes in the outer movements, and the *cantabile* melody above a *basso continuo* in the Andante, are in principle thoroughly Italianate, they are not as specifically so as, say, the opening movement of Handel's F major Suite (1719/20) for harpsichord, which is so close to Corelli in many of its details.

Nevertheless, the Italian Concerto does undeniably share some characteristics with, say, Vivaldi's Concerto in G minor as transcribed by Bach (RV 316 and BWV 975). Both the two first movements in 2/4 time, the chordal themes and passages, the running motifs and episodes, the clear *da capo* shape, even perhaps the slurs and little dactyls – all these suggest that strong impressions remained with Bach from certain music of Vivaldi learnt twenty years before *Clavierübung II* was published, as well they might, and that he wittingly alluded to them. If one compares the Vivaldi arrangement BWV 975 with Bach's Italian Concerto, it does

appear likely that, though naturally with his own harmonic and melodic characteristics, Bach had picked up from Vivaldi ideas of what a concerto episode is, and how it contrasts with the main material. And yet, despite such conceptual similarities as these, nowhere does the Italian Concerto have the effortless, seemingly thoughtless, caprice of Venetian concertos, and it is unlikely ever to be mistaken for one of them. Nor vice-versa.⁴

The Overture in B minor, on the other hand, is very French in concept and countless stylistic details, more so than the Six Partitas or any other keyboard work of Bach since one youthful imitation (the Overture in F major, BWV 820). The figuration, rhythms, harmonies, textures, dance-characteristics and melodic touches are those of a composer very familiar indeed with French orchestral suites, not least from his own earlier successes in this genre. Although many details in their respective sources suggest that the C minor was the earlier version, being transposed for – and probably just before – the print, the reason for the transposition is not obvious. But it must have been compelling, since to most players the C minor version feels more idiomatic and comfortable. Of course, the Overture's B minor suits the published tonal scheme in so far as it is as distant as possible from the Concerto's F major. And, since both C and B minor could be seen as typically French keys for such a suite, B minor may have been simulating another French characteristic and one familiar in Dresden at the time: the taste for extra-low pitch, a semitone lower than ordinary chamber-music pitch of the time.

There is another point about the presumed transposition. One Partita in C minor was already in print, so there was no need for another. But this one, BWV 826, had been 'international', with some distinctly Italian elements (a melismatic Andante, a violinistic Fugue and Capriccio) and German ones (the Allemande). The 'newer' one, BWV 831a, was more thoroughly and consistently French, a true *ouverture* without Allemande but with a series of dances, in this respect much like Bach's so-called orchestral suites (BWV 1066–1069). Is it possible that two C minor works were conceived at much the same time and meant to be different in the styles they allude to, thus giving the composer the idea of a more complete contrast between Italian and French styles for a later publication – as in fact turned out to be the case?

Clavierübung III

From the two-manual harpsichord required for *Clavierübung II*, Part III (1739) now moves to the organ:

Dritter Theil der Clavier Übung bestehend in verschiedenen Vorspielen über die Catechismus- und andere Gesaenge, vor die Orgel: Denen Liebhabern, und besonders denen Kennern von dergleichen Arbeit, zur Gemüths Erzeugung verfertigt von . . .

Third Part of Keyboard Practice, consisting of various Preludes on the Catechism and other hymns, for the organ; prepared for the soul's delight of music-lovers and especially for connoisseurs of such work by . . .⁵

The reason why the title does not ask for two manuals, as *Clavierübung II* had done, is almost certainly because organists of the time were much more used to this requirement than harpsichordists, and they would assume they needed two for at least some of the pieces in this or any collection. Had they been exceptional and fortunate enough to have three manuals at their disposal, they could certainly have found ways to use all three in the opening and closing movements, although the composer does not specify them. (The idea, born of 'purist' tendencies in the early music revival of the twentieth century, that manuals were not changed in the multi-sectional preludes and fugues of J. S. Bach and other composers is not supported by unmistakable and positive evidence, and seems against musical common sense.)

The pieces of Part III were probably being composed over the period 1735–9. Various musical stimuli can be suggested for the volume, including the wish to show how *Clavierübung II*'s French and Italian styles could be taken over and adapted to the organ. Then there was other contemporary organ music, including that of minor composers. Bach's retail agency in 1734–5 of C. F. Hurlbusch's *Compositioni musicali* introduced him to pieces no more than jejune, but they may have suggested to him a fugue-subject and other details to develop in his own masterly E \flat Prelude and Fugue. Faint echoes of Bach's involvement in 1736 with J. G. Walther's publication *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr* might be heard in one of the chorale-settings (BWV 676). And acquaintance over the years with certain French organ music (Grigny, Du Mage) could have suggested to him the idea of making a Lutheran equivalent to their liturgically planned *livres d'orgue*.

Perhaps receiving the title of Saxon court composer in late 1736 prompted Bach to produce a monumental volume of organ music to match the monumental choral works associated with this appointment (the Kyrie and Gloria of the so-called B minor Mass). Or, perhaps the volume followed on the composer's Dresden recital in December 1736 much as the *Musical Offering* was to follow on his appearance at the Potsdam Court – that is, he produced a publication reflecting what had been played and further worked on after the recital. This particular December organ-recital was in the new Frauenkirche, a unique church of great fame in 'baroque Germany', and the organ was a new and spectacular instrument by Gottfried Silbermann, of whose smaller organ in the Sophienkirche Wilhelm Friedemann was *titulaire* at the time – a position for which no doubt he too needed a repertory of pieces. Very different from *Clavierübung III* though his own best-known music turned out to be, Friedemann might well have played such organ music for church services, much as he was later to perform some of his father's cantatas.

Part III has the biggest and most complicated plan of all the volumes of 'Keyboard Music', containing clear divisions in the integrated whole:

the Prelude in E♭

a series of large and small mass settings (six Kyrie and Christe chorales, three Gloria chorales)

a series of large and small catechism settings (twelve, two for each chorale)

four *Duetti*

the Fugue in E♭

Twenty-seven pieces in all – perhaps one of the volume's many allusions to the Trinity (3 × 3 × 3) and to Lutheran orthodoxy. The mass settings represent Luther's reformed liturgy as the catechism settings represent Luther's reformed doctrine. There are many levels and types of intricacy in *Clavierübung III* which need fuller discussion elsewhere, but for present purposes one should be aware that the collection is an unsurpassed compendium of both pious and musical allusion, in some respects surely forbidding for musicians now as then – note the unique reference to 'connoisseurs' on the title page.

At least four major agendas are being played out here. First, the overall plan is much like that of an idealized organ-recital, with a massive

ritornello prelude and final fugue in three sections, framing a series of liturgical chorales. This is a recital-plan such as one eye-witness of the period describes Bach as following in Leipzig, though the publication itself could have established such plans. Then the texts, including Luther's catechism hymns, rehearse orthodox liturgy and doctrine not in theory but in practical settings for organ, i.e. as pieces usable in actual services by a proficient ('practised') organist. The smaller chorales, though not necessarily easier to play than the larger, could also have served as devotional music at home. Thirdly, the music itself ranges from quasi-Palestrinian counterpoint (*stile antico*) to quasi-galant chamber trios, from French and Italian idioms to traditional German-Lutheran counterpoint, and as such offered a range of stylistic models or lessons for any composer.

And finally, the impeccable invertible counterpoint of the four *Duetti* and various trios, the two big-scale canons, and at least three distinct fugue-types (fughetta, ricercar, and a *Well-tempered Clavier* type) provide models of contrapuntal working superior to any handbook by any theorist. *There*, perhaps, lies a problem with the volume: one senses a calculated theoretical, didactic or even doctrinaire component to it. This component might be to some extent countered by a would-be modernity in some of the settings, but this is a modernity which nevertheless lacks the more artless melody of such music as the cantata-arias published for organ some years later (the *Schübler Chorales*). That during the broad period of composition Bach's students included several later prolific writers or, may one say, pedants (Mizler, Agricola, Kirnberger) could be a further element in the picture.

Details in the engraved (etched) plates, described in Butler, *Clavier-Übung III*, suggest the contents of the volume to have gradually evolved. According to such reasoning, it started with the mass and larger catechism settings; to these were added the Prelude and Fugue in E♭, along with the smaller settings (later 1738); and finally, in the middle of 1739, the four *Duetti* were introduced, amongst other things to fill empty space and to make up the number of pieces to twenty-seven. An aim of the volume was to include elements of French, Italian and traditional German organ music, with the texts in German but drawing on Latin and Greek originals. In this connection the composer may even have had in mind some allusion to a much earlier book originating (like Kuhnau's) in Leipzig, copies of which he owned: this was the keyboard music or

Tabulaturbuch published in 1571/83 by the then organist of St Thomas's, Nicolaus Ammerbach, whose title page promised German, Latin, Italian and French pieces.

Much more modern works too are relevant to *Clavierübung III*, of course. Since one of the Leipzig engravers working on the volume had also worked on another big chorale-collection of the time, Kauffmann's *Harmonische Seelenlust* of 1733, it is likely that Bach was well acquainted with it and possibly set out to supersede it with frankly better music – that is to say, with more substantial settings, more wide-ranging styles, a harmonic sense ever beyond a Kauffmann, some modern notational details (slurs, dots, *p* and *f* signs) and some learned archaisms (modal key-signatures for some pieces). Kauffmann had given organ-stop registrations for his chorales, and why Bach did not can only be guessed – perhaps because he had in mind 'serious' contrapuntal creations very different from Kauffmann's colourful and approachable settings of well-known melodies.

We should not forget that in his new volume Bach must also have been responding to himself – to his earlier organ music and its various approaches to setting chorale-melodies for organ. Thus, rather than the rapt and immediate beauty of the small-scale chorales of the *Orgelbüchlein* (1713–15), we now have instances of that abstract idiom that so often attracts composers in their maturity. And rather than the easy melody of some other early chorales, or the terse drama of many a youthful chorale-harmonization, we now have an earnest, spacious, almost distant majesty of expression, sometimes rich and dense, sometimes deft and light, sometimes calculated and always free of whimsy. The result in many of the pieces is a certain remoteness, and I think one could not regard *Clavierübung III* as 'superior' to the *Orgelbüchlein* in the way the harpsichord partitas are clearly an advance on the English Suites.

One interesting possibility emerges from the similarity between the Hurlbusch pieces and those framing *Clavierübung III*: Hurlbusch's are in D major, and the question arises whether this was the original key – in intention or in fact – of the great Prelude and Fugue in E♭. These are, after all, *organo pleno* or Full Organ music of a kind seldom found in such a key as this before equal temperament. The Prelude's unlikely passage in E♭ minor would then be in D minor, and throughout both pieces, D major or minor fits the hands better. In *Clavierübung II* as well, the composer

seems to have gone to the trouble of changing the Overture's original key, presumably for an important purpose, but again one not explained. In *Clavierübung III*, would such a transposition be for the three flats to serve as yet another allusion to the Trinity? Or because the next piece (the first Kyrie) also has three flats, begins on a $b\flat$ and therefore follows on better than if the Prelude had ended in D major? But if that were the case, and since in an actual Lutheran service the Kyrie would not follow straight on the organ's opening voluntary, might this be further evidence that *Clavierübung III* was indeed an idealized recital-programme?

'*Clavierübung IV*'

Within twenty-four or perhaps thirty months of Part III, Bach had had the *Aria with 30 Variations* published, and none of his buyers could have been prepared for the total change of musical personality between the two books. The very difference between them was unusual for a pair of keyboard books of the time, perhaps unique.

Whatever the precise dating of the *Goldberg Variations* – composed over 1739 to 1740, engraved during 1741, on sale at the Leipzig Michaelmas Fair 1741? (see Butler, 'Neues zur Datierung') – one imagines a certain *family aspect* to it in so far as the same engraver-publisher Schmid in Nuremberg was shortly to publish Philipp Emanuel's *Prussian Sonatas*, which are harpsichord or piano pieces of unmistakable modernity. (These too are hardly free of Rameau's influence, I think, although he is nowhere acknowledged by Philipp Emanuel.) About that time too Anna Magdalena copied the *Goldberg Aria* into her keyboard album, either from the print or from another, now lost copy by the composer. Strange, if the whole thing was already or about to be available at the time – perhaps the variations were beyond her, and it was the *Aria* she liked? Wilhelm Friedemann's likely connection with the work in Dresden has already been mentioned. Despite such possibilities, however, the work's compositional history is uncertain and various hypotheses on its early stages can be made. Three may be briefly mentioned.

The first is that the variety, extreme contrast, elements of caprice and sheer virtuosity of the *Goldberg* do make one think of Domenico Scarlatti, whose first book of harpsichord pieces had recently been published in London: the *Essercizi* of 1738. *Essercizi* is an equivalent of *Übungen*,

and it is a curious coincidence that the volume contains thirty highly characterized sonatas, the last one contrapuntally ingenious. Little is yet documented on what London publications might have been known in Saxony in 1740, and the name Scarlatti appears only fitfully in the usual Bach literature. But still, it cannot be out of the question that the *Goldberg* was in part a response to that not very clearly organized book of Scarlatti, whose fabulous musicianship and playing technique are nevertheless clear enough from it. The opening and closing phases of the *Goldberg*'s structure are not very clearly organized either, if we assume the variations are numbered in the order composed, which nobody knows for certain.

A second idea is that since the canon at the ninth (No. 27) is the only true round in two parts, and comes only after all the other intervals in the octave are represented (see the list of movements below), it and movements around it have been added at some point. The 'original plan' might have been for twenty-four movements, formed around the other eight canons going up from the unison to the octave.⁶ But in order to pursue this idea, other conjectures become necessary – such as that the French Overture halfway through was another late addition – for which there seems no firmer evidence than for other, and conflicting, observations one might make on the individual movements. More than one writer has thought that there are very good reasons for having nine canons (see below, p. 99), and no evidence has emerged to show that the work was or was not realized according to a scheme fixed in every detail before the composer began.

A third hypothesis is that one particular manuscript copy of Variation 5 is conveying an early form of it, apparently independent of the print, in which the notation is less detailed (the crotchets plain, without implied articulation) and some of the figuration seems to be in a form not yet finalized.⁷ Seeing that more trouble is often taken with notation when a work is to be engraved and published – i.e. to make it more precise, as in the case of the Overture engraved and published in *Clavierübung II* – the hypothesis is just plausible. But there is no evidence whatever for dating this version, whose title is *Prelude*.

Whichever of these ideas might be usefully explored in further researches, the *Goldberg* as a whole is certainly to be seen as contributing

to the repertory of keyboard music in a new way, by bringing into the public domain the idea of the unrepeatable or ‘one-off variation cycle’, complex variations of an unusual kind, clearly models in some sense and yet hardly imitable. One could not make such points about other variations then in print, by Handel, Couperin and Rameau, to name only the best. Though the polished work of gifted composers, their variations could conceivably have been matched by other sets of a similar kind, and Handel alone included nine examples in the seventeen suites of his first two books. (There are none in *Clavierübung I* and *II*.)

Also, the *Goldberg*’s incomparably elegant Aria has little in common with the conventional 4/4 *aria* of German variations as seen in the works of Pachelbel (*Hexachordum Apollinis*, 1699), Handel again (e.g. D minor, HWV 428) or even early Bach (the *Aria variata* all [*a*] *man[iera] italiana* in A minor). This last, Bach’s only other set of harpsichord variations, seems far less a preparation for the *Goldberg* than do his other, bigger-scaled and unrepeatable compositions based on harmonic variation: the violin Chaconne, the organ Passacaglia and the chorale-cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden*. The *Goldberg Variations* for harpsichord have more in common with the *Canonic Variations* for organ than with the early *Aria variata*.

But there are various other versions of the ‘one-off variation cycle’ from Bach’s later years, and in each of them he was leaving far behind the realms of the readily imitable. The *Goldberg Variations*, the ‘Fourteen Canons’ (based on a common-property bass), the *Musical Offering* (fugues, canons and a whole trio-sonata based on Frederick the Great’s theme), the *Canonic Variations* (canons around the melody of one of Martin Luther’s chorales), and the *Art of Fugue* (fugues and canons worked from an original theme): essentially, all of these were dead ends, wonderfully instructive but hardly progenitive. To add to the fund of keyboard variations popular at the time, a highly reasoned plan like the *Goldberg*’s – with its symmetries, contrapuntal ingenuities, systematic array of genres and taxing technical demands – is surely to be seen as a deliberate attempt on the composer’s part to ‘raise the standards’ then current.

In considering the four *Clavierübung* volumes as a group, there emerges a (so to speak) worrying question. In the middle of each volume, and nowhere else but here, is a piece in the French style – the *stile francese* as

the editors of the posthumous *Art of Fugue* called it – complete with the characteristic rhythms and rhetorical gestures of a French overture:

the 4th of 6 partitas in Part I	p. 33 out of 73 pages
the 2nd of 2 pieces in Part II	p. 14 out of 29
the 14th of 27 organ pieces in Part III	p. 39 out of 77
the 16th of 30 variations in ‘Part IV’	p. 16 out of 32

(In the case of Part III, the frenchified movement cannot be a prelude-and-fugue as in Parts I, II and IV but has to be a chorale-setting.) The symmetry is there to be seen on paper and is probably more theoretical than practical: it need not mean that if one timed a performance of all the music, those pieces would hit the halfway point. But note that if this organization around a kind of musical pivot is not accidental – and it is hard to see quite how it could be – several things would follow.

First, the composer must have had a reason for it, and one can only assume that he was familiar with the rhetoricians’ notion of the ‘Inner Exordium’: the idea that as one gives an extended speech (sermon, plea, address), it is effective to start again in the middle. Secondly, since Part I of *Clavierübung* – a combination of separate publications – has the least symmetrical pagination, perhaps Bach had not intended the patterning quite so literally at first, and/or then resolved to ‘improve’ on this with the later volumes.⁸ Thirdly, since various engravers worked on the volumes, it looks as if the composer oversaw the production from this point of view, perhaps in each case (certainly Parts II, III and IV) leaving firm directions for the volume’s eventual pagination.⁹ And lastly, since the four French pieces have keys that make a particular pattern –

D major, B minor, E minor and G major

(i) D major is the relative of B minor, E minor of G major

(ii) D is the dominant of G, B of E

– either this is a coincidence or the *Goldberg Variations* are in G major not because of the associations of its bass but because more than a decade earlier a suite in D major had been published. But how can that be? Is it really possible that Bach took this and not some other standard bass

because it was traditionally associated with G major, the key he needed for this pattern in *Clavierübung*?

The ‘Fourteen Canons’, BWV 1087

In one extant copy of ‘Part IV’ there are a few markings in the hand of the composer (the, or a, so-called *Handexemplar*), which perhaps he was preparing for a later and improved edition. At the end of it, on the inside of the copy’s outer covering page, the composer added fourteen brief perpetual canons in unrealized form, numbered 1–14 by him and entitled:

Verschiedene Canones über die ersten acht Fundamental-Noten vorheriger Arie. von J. S. Bach

Diverse canons on the first eight fundamental notes of the preceding Aria, by J. S. Bach

Fourteen immediately suggests some kind of allusion to BACH (= 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 = 14), especially as there are actually fifteen pieces (No. 10 is double); similarly, an ‘*etc*’ written at the end, which contrasts with *Fine* at the end of the *Goldberg* on the previous page, might mean that he could make more of them if he wished. But such points could also work against supposing an allusion to BACH. Besides, if number 14 is significant here, so then is number 10 for the rather similar-looking canons printed in the *Musical Offering*. Ten for the Commandments (*decem canones*) – if not, why not? If so, why?

Of the ‘Fourteen Canons’ twelve are in the modern 2/4 (popular for examples in theory books); one of them (No. 10) has more than one solution, none entirely without infelicity; and yet another (No. 13) has a simple countersubject almost certainly taken from Fux’s well-known treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum*.¹⁰ The handwriting is probably of 1747 or 1748 and is roughly contemporary with other canonic work of the composer, in the *Canonic Variations* for organ, the *Musical Offering* for chamber group and the *Art of Fugue* for keyboard. Whether as a set they were originally composed or compiled earlier – before or after the *Goldberg* – is not known, however, or whether they were intended for publication in a revised edition of the variations. But from a musical

point of view, one could see the *Goldberg Variations* as ‘extending’ their short, eight-note theme rather as Purcell had pulled it out into a five-bar phrase or as Bach’s organ Passacaglia had doubled the length of André Raison’s original *passacaille* bass (see p. 38). With the *Goldberg*, of course, the ‘extension’ is on a more massive scale.

Although two of the fourteen canons survive in other copies, this is the only known grouping of them as a set, here a fair copy presumably made from an earlier draft. As with the *Musical Offering*’s canons, there is no extant realization of them by the composer. The very similarity of the wording ‘diverse variations’ and ‘diverse canons’ in the titles of the *Goldberg* and the ‘Fourteen Canons’ makes the latter look like a complement, in miniature, to the massive movements of the former, and the first four of them are as short as a diatonic canon can be. The little theme (eight simple crotchets) somewhat resembles the first line of the chorale-melody used for the variations, ‘Vom Himmel hoch’ (see Example 1), while its canonic techniques complement those of the *Musical Offering* – but again on a smaller scale.

Example 1

(a) Canonic bass of ‘Fourteen Canons’



(b) Chorale-melody, ‘Vom Himmel hoch’, first line



The eight notes sound like a bass line and produce a diatonic progression so simple that one might think only a composer with certain preoccupations would take the trouble to write canons on it.¹¹ This Bach does with the apparent intention of giving a two-level survey of canonic types that are based on short repeated phrases of four bars and so serving as epitomes or *exempla in parvo*. The first musical level surveyed is that of canonic species, i.e. the settings progress from simple canons of eight notes against themselves to a six-part triple canon and a four-part canon involving augmentation and diminution – which one is left to find for oneself, like the ‘Seek and ye shall find’ canons of the *Musical Offering*.

The second musical level surveyed is figural species, i.e. the notes and lines range from minims to semiquavers, with conjunct or disjunct motion, plain or syncopated, diatonic or chromatic, with canonic intervals from unison to an octave-and-a-fourth. This sounds complicated, but the epitome-like nature of the bass-lines ensures so straightforward a sequence of tonic, dominant and subdominant chords that it is not too difficult to create lines that will move logically and combine convincingly. To write a canon above a given bass-line may sound supererogatory – the bass is an extra factor for the composer to take into account as he composes – but in fact this framework, if of such a basic type, is a help.

Clearly, some of these items of musical vocabulary also appear in the *Goldberg Variations*, but on a bigger scale. Particularly by the time the last of the ‘Fourteen Canons’ is reached, the counterpoint has worked towards the kind of musical sound that appears nowhere else but in canons – and is even there only *just* plausible.