

Influences upon Johann Sebastian Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*

Casey Robertson

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When one discusses the body of work attributed to Johann Sebastian Bach, the notions of brilliant creativity, innovation and originality are most often applied to his creative output. While the vast majority of scholars unanimously agree upon his importance as a pioneering figure within the Baroque period, musicologists such as Richard Jones believe that while Bach was largely self-taught, there also are observable influences from previous composers evident in his works; especially those composed within his early developing years. This discussion will aim to examine this argument through J.S. Bach's pivotal keyboard work of *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* and attempt to illuminate possible influences evident from earlier composers.

One of the first items worthy of mention in this discussion is that the early periods of a composer's output often reflect attributes or stylistic features borrowed from those who were deemed influential during the earlier years of his or her musical education and upbringing. Musicologists such as Jones describe this early period as a type of juvenilia, which embodies a strong reliance upon external models¹. In the case of Bach, Jones claims a definite Northern-German influence upon his early toccatas; citing composers such as Buxtehude and Reineckin who had employed the rhapsodic freedoms of the *stylus phantasticus*; embodying strong applications of spontaneous gestures of improvisation, which could be either authentic or contrived.² It is through the pseudo-improvisatory preludes and interludes that could be said to have had a stratifying nature upon the theme and texture of fugal movements. With this stated, Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* executed an Adagio interlude entirely upon a fixed chord progression which also formed the subject of meditative sequences for the whole movement. Jones references this same technique to be evident in Reineckin's *Tocatta in G*,³ with parallels also present in the works of Zachow, Werckmeister, Böhm, and Kuhnau.⁴ The virtuoso pedal work is also illustrative in a rather "free" style similar to that of Bruhns in his *G Major*

Praeludium, which was probably influential towards Bach's early musical development.⁵ Still, this piece has many unique and innovative aspects, such as the prelude-fugue-postlude cadenza-like composition resembling more of the interludes of a five part prelude. While it seems evident that there are definite aspects of the northern school in this work, the stretched-out recitative and fleeting passages employed are ultimately rather unusual.⁶ The use of diminished sevenths throughout the first twenty-seven measures also generates an idiom atypical of much organ music written during this period.

While the influence of the various composers appears to be evident upon Bach's early musical development, it should be noted that unlike his contemporary George Frederick Handel, J.S. Bach did not partake in the same formal educational to learn composition. Much of his pedagogical studies for the organ appear to have been acquired from his older brother Johann Christoph Bach, who gave him a book containing works by Johann Kaspar Kerll, Johann Pachelbel and Johann Jakob Froberger. This has led Jones to hypothesize that Bach's musical upbringing had a type of dual context; the influence of these composers, along with his rapidly burgeoning skills as a keyboardist through his mastery of the works given to him by J.C. Bach.⁷ According to his son Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach, his father's early influences also included those of Frescobaldi, Fischer, Bruhns and Strungk; all of whom were proficient writers of the fugue, which was the prevailing imitative genre of the period.⁸ With this said, Bach appears to have been influenced by aspects of both the French and Italian traditions; especially that of Italian instrumental music both directly and indirectly. His early fugues often borrowed elements from Italian trio sonatas, which illustrate a definite familiarity with this idiom, while Reincken and Bach's possible instructor Georg Böhm⁹ were also well-acquainted with the Italian style, generating indirect exposure through their practices. On a side note, it is interesting to observe

that other than his older brother, there is little evidence in existence that Bach had any formal teachers. Wolff notes that C.P.E. Bach corrected the obituary for his father where he changed Böhm's title from "teacher" to "organist"; illustrating that Böhm may have exercised some form of mentoring role over J.S. Bach. The extent of this possibly, however, ultimately remains unknown.¹⁰ Still, one would not appear to be unreasonable to draw a correlation between *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor* and the *Praeludia* of Böhm through unique features orchestrated to generate surprises (G minor) with frequent flourishes, (C Major, A Minor).¹¹ According to Wolff, of all the composers mentioned, Reincken's works probably exercised the greatest influence upon Bach in his early years. He cites Reincken's virtuoso style, and reputation as an organ expert which would have been very appealing to Bach, along with the fact that of all the North German composers, Reincken was the only one that Bach actually prepared arrangements of sonata movements from.¹²

According to Claude Palisca, while the toccata form would eventually become a fixture of keyboard music in the Baroque period, the earliest dated toccata is traceable to a 1536 collection of lute music issued by Castiglione in Milan.¹³ He cited early contributors of the fugal form to be Annibale Padovano, Andrea Gabrieli and Claudio Merulo; all organists at St. Mark's basilica in Venice. Upon examination of the scores of Merulo's *Toccatà*¹⁴ and Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor*¹⁵, one can witness a similar structural notion of figurative and imitative qualities; showing possible influence from even earlier composers. Palisca points out that in addition to the influence of earlier organ works, there were also significant elements that Bach synthesized from non-organ instruments such as the violin, brass instruments, and the harpsichord. He cites Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's concertos which he reiterated for solo organ; illustrating his interest in the technical appeal of Italian concerto. Examples of this

correlation may be found in his *Tocatta in C Major (BWV 564)*, which embodies three sections that are analogous to the three movements that would be found in the concerto. This influence of the concerto is also evident in a less dramatic fashion when examining the *Praeludium and Fugue in A Minor* which has a definite violin performance aesthetic to it, despite it clearly being written for two hands upon a keyboard.¹⁶ Peter Williams actually goes as far to suggest even the possibility that *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* was intended to “imitate” string music.¹⁷

At this point, it seems appropriate to include a brief digression into the topic of authorship pertaining to *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. While this piece is quite possibly J.S. Bach’s most well-known organ work, certain musicologists such as Williams have questioned Bach as the composer due to the rather unusual structural aspects employed such as the use of parallel octaves in the introduction, the unaccompanied solo pedal statement, subdominant answers to the fugue, along with its harmonies and countersubjects employing thirds and sixths.¹⁸ The rhetoric of the prelude-fugue-postlude combination could also be described as rather exuberant and dramatic when compared to Bach’s other fugue works such as the *‘Little’ E Minor Prelude and Fugue (BWV 533)* which tended to be much tighter, and more conservative in expression.¹⁹ These discrepancies in stylistic form have caused certain scholars to credit the work instead to Johann Peter Kellner.²⁰ Others such as Malcolm Boyd remain more sceptical of this hypothesis due to the fact that there is often great difficulty in establishing a notion of rigid stylistic norms for the early music of the Baroque period; preferring instead to leave the question of authenticity open.²¹ While this is clearly an interesting topic, it is also one which requires a much more in-depth examination than is appropriate for this particular discussion. Perhaps the most relevant point to be drawn out from this alternate theory is that the potential similarities of

the piece with other composers such as Kellner further illuminate the idea of influence from predecessors upon Bach's keyboard works.

In context, it appears evident that Johann Sebastian Bach did indeed partake in a considerable amount of self-directed teaching in relation to his compositional development. However, like many other of the great composers both before and after his time, his work exhibits a definite influence of those whom he studied musically. With this stated, this evidence of influence is in no means a detraction towards the creative genius of J.S. Bach, but rather an interesting portrait of his musical background. Perhaps one might conclude this discussion by correlating Bach's use of previous influences with Isaac Newton's famous quote relating to building upon scientific knowledge which stated "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants".²²

End Notes

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- ⁶ Williams, Peter. *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, United Kingdom. 2003.p.155.
- ⁷ Jones, Richard. *The Keyboard Works: Bach as teacher and virtuoso, The Cambridge Companion to Bach*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, United Kingdom. 2001.
- ⁸ Gauldin, Robert. *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1997. P. 453.
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- ¹⁰ Wolff, Christoph. *Bach*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1991. P. 57.
- ¹¹ Williams, Peter. *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, United Kingdom. 2003. P. 156.
- ¹² Wolff, Christoph. *Bach*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1991. P. 64.
- ¹³ Palisca, Claude. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 97.
- ¹⁴ Palisca, Claude. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 98.
- ¹⁵ Bach, Johann Sebastian. "<http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/f/f4/IMSLP01335-BWV0565.pdf>". Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Accessed February 27, 2012.
- ¹⁶ Palisca, Claude. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 209.
- ¹⁷ Williams, Peter. *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, United Kingdom. 2003.p.157.
- ¹⁸ Williams, Peter. *BWV 565: A toccata in D minor for organ by J. S. Bach?*, *Early Music* 9, July 1981, Oxford Journals. 1981. P. 330–334.
- ¹⁹ Boyd, Malcolm. *Bach*. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2000. P. 32.
- ²⁰ Humphreys, David. *The D Minor Toccata BWV 565*. *Early Music* Vol. 10, No. 2. Oxford Journals. 1982. P. 216.

²¹ Boyd, Malcolm. *Bach*. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2000. P. 32.

²² McGarry, Daniel. *The Metalogicon of John Salisbury*. University of California Press. Berkeley, California. 1955. P.167.