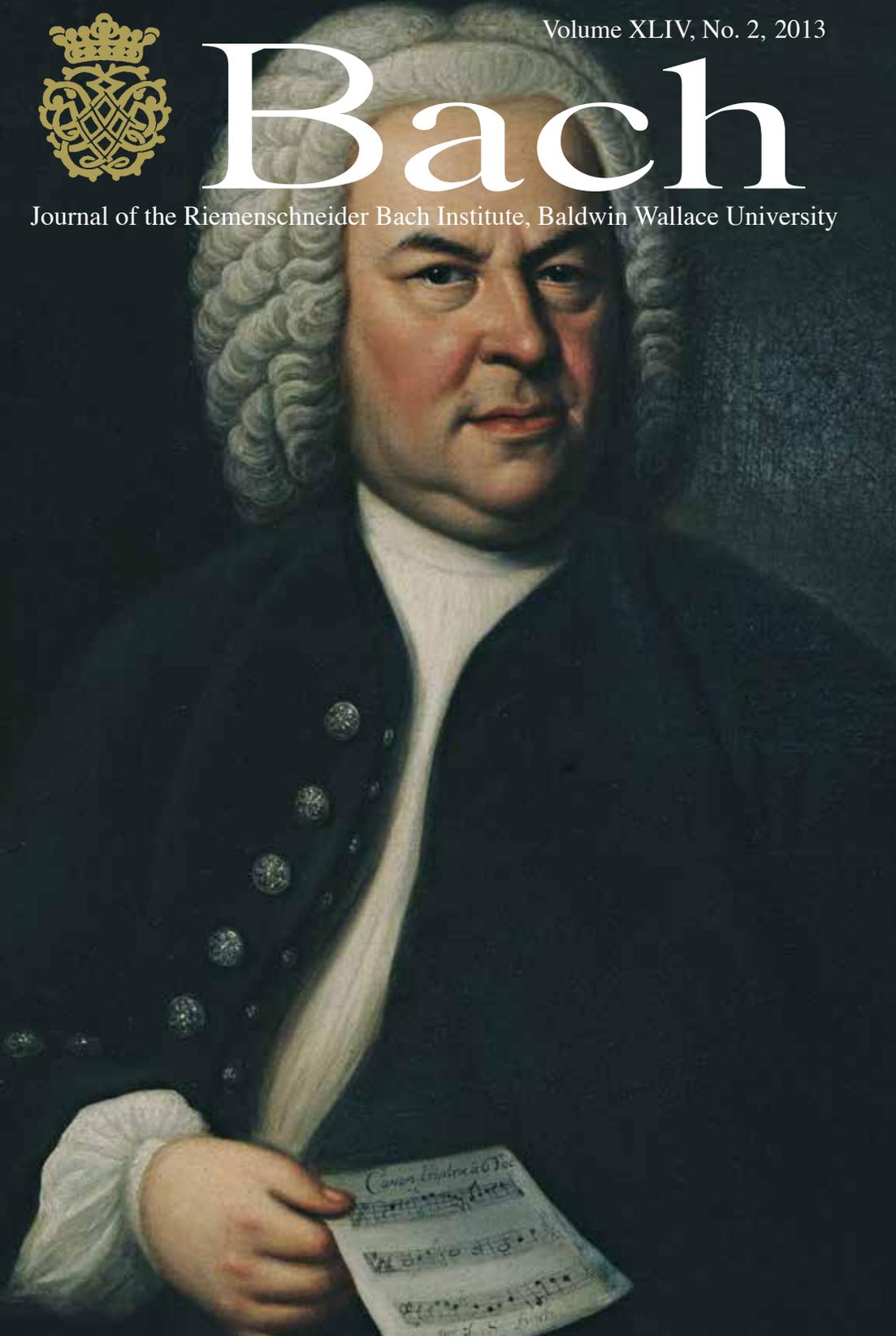




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ONCE AGAIN ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF BWV 907 AND BWV 908

Maxim Serebrennikov

Introduction

The enormously rich keyboard output of J. S. Bach includes (along with compositions of other genres) more than sixty small polyphonic pairings, consisting of a prelude or a fantasia and a fugue or fughetta. The exclusion from this number of two or three cycles because of misattribution would seem unlikely to have much of an impact on the overall picture of Bach's keyboard works, that is, it is unlikely to change drastically how the output is to be viewed. Not so, however, in the case of the Fantasia and Fughetta BWV 907 and Fantasia and Fughetta BWV 908. For many years, these pieces, written down in traditional thoroughbass notation, served as the only (therefore, very valuable) evidence of Bach's treatment of the Italian improvisation practice of *partimento*.¹ For this reason, the question of authorship for these two works is very relevant.

The Sources

The Fantasia and Fughetta BWV 907 and Fantasia and Fughetta BWV 908 have reached us in five manuscript copies.² It is significant,

¹The term *partimento* is used in modern music theory and practice in two meanings. Broadly, *partimento* means the art of solo keyboard improvisation based on the thoroughbass technique (see J.-A. Bötticher; J. B. Christensen, *Generalbaß*, in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, Sachteil, vol. 3 [Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995], col. 1241). More narrowly, *partimento* signifies an exercise or piece notated as a solo thoroughbass.

²See *Goettingen Bach Catalogue: Sources of J. S. Bach's Works* [website], URL: http://www.bach.gwdg.de/bach_engl.html (accessed 11/04/2012).

that Bach is given as the author in each manuscript, but in one source—manuscript Am. B. 531 from the estate of Princess Anna Amalia of Prussia—the name “Jean Sebast. Bach” is crossed out and corrected to “Kirchhof” in handwriting that is clearly not of the original copyist (Figure 1). This one correction alone has brought the fact of Bach’s authorship under scrutiny.



Figure 1. Fantasia in B major (BWV 907/1). Am. B. 531. Fol. 1 (fragment).

In 1978, important clarifications were introduced concerning the surviving sources of BWV 907 and BWV 908. On the one hand, Yoshitake Kobayashi established that the correction found in the manuscript Am. B. 531 is in the hand of Bach’s pupil Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721–1783).³ On the other hand, Hans-Joachim Schulze identified the scribe of one of the earliest copies of BWV 907 and BWV 908 (now held in the Brussels Royal Library under the shelf mark Fétis 7327 C Mus). It was another of Bach’s pupils, Carl Gotthelf Gerlach (1704–1761).⁴

In contrast to Kirnberger, Gerlach was not only Bach’s pupil, but also a copyist of his “original manuscripts.”⁵ This status suggests that we regard his testimony as more trustworthy than Kirnberger’s.

³Yoshitake Kobayashi, “Neuerkenntnisse zu einigen Bach-Quellen an hand schriftkundlicher Untersuchungen,” *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 1978, 51.

⁴Hans-Joachim Schulze, “Das Stück in Goldpapier—Ermittlungen zu einigen Bach-Abschriften des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 1978, 36–37.

⁵The concept of an “original manuscript” (“Originalhandschrift”) involves, along with Bach’s autographs themselves, the copies, prepared by order of the master and under his direct supervision or even with his participation. See Yoshitake Kobayashi and Kirsten Beißwenger, *Die Kopisten Johann Sebastian Bachs. Katalog und Dokumentation*. Textband (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2007), xix.

However, Fétis 7327 C Mus is not an “original manuscript,” since it does not contain traces of Bach’s participation, which can be seen (by contrast) in the manuscript copies of four parts (oboe 1, oboe 2, viola, and harpsichord) from the orchestral suite in C major BWV 1066, prepared by Gerlach together with others copyists between May 1724 and the end of 1725.⁶ That is why Schulze’s position of leaving the question about the authorship of BWV 907 and BWV 908 open seems correct and wise: “If one refrains from conclusions based on style, then this question is unlikely to be resolved without the discovery of new sources.”⁷

As for Kirnberger, his reputation as musician and theorist as well as his studies under J. S. Bach similarly do not allow us to disregard the correction he made to the name on the manuscript Am. B. 531. At the same time, there are no strong reasons to trust unconditionally his revision of the original attribution. We do not know what led Kirnberger to make the correction. Whether Kirnberger was acquainted with any of Kirchhoff’s works is also unknown. At any rate, Kirnberger never mentions Kirchhoff or his music in his own theoretical writings. On the other hand, as an educated and erudite musician, Kirnberger must have known the *Abhandlung von der Fuge* (1753–1754) by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg—his major opponent on some theoretical issues.⁸ Kirnberger undoubtedly knew this progressive and encyclopedic work on fugue. In particular, he must have been familiar with the passage on Kirchhoff’s fugues, notated as figured bass:

If the late Musikdirektor Kirchhof of Halle used figures alone to indicate the contrapuntal parts in his well-known “fugues in all twenty-four keys,” he did so because he wanted to instruct his

⁶Kobayashi and Beißwenger, *Die Kopisten Johann Sebastian Bachs*, 70.

⁷“Sieht man von der Möglichkeit stilkritischer Erörterungen ab, so ist eine Lösung des Problems ohne neue Quellenfunde wohl nicht zu erwarten.” (Schulze, “Das Stück in Goldpapier²—Ermittlungen zu einigen Bach-Abschriften,” 36–37).

⁸According to Joel Lester, the dispute between Marpurg and Kirnberger concerning harmonic theory was the most significant in the second half of the eighteenth century (*Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992], 231–57). See also Howard Serwer, “Marpurg versus Kirnberger: Theories of Fugal Composition,” *Journal of Music Theory* 14/2 (1970): 209–36.

students in the technique of figured bass along with the various possibilities of thematic entrance in a fugal movement.⁹

If Kirnberger did not have an authentic source of Kirchhoff's works at his disposal, but relied instead on Marpurg's characterization, it is conceivable that he replaced Bach's name with Kirchhoff's in Am. B. 531 because the fuguetas did not coincide with his conception of a "proper" Bach fugue but rather to the descriptions of Kirchhoff's fugues. As to identifying a time frame for the correction, we may speculate that he added it after 1758, the year when he became Princess Amalia's music teacher and curator of her music library.¹⁰ In contrast, Gerlach had worked closely with Bach as a copyist c. 1724–1725 and helped him with the *Figuralmusik* in the following years.¹¹

The Destiny of BWV 907 and BWV 908 and New Discoveries

The polyphonic cycles under discussion were first published in 1839 by Carl Czerny (in two version: in *partimento* notation and as a realization with his editorial interpretations) in the fourth volume of a series by the *Bureau de Musique de C. F. Peters*, which presented all of Bach's keyboard works.¹² Since then, the pieces have been reproduced multiple times in other editions, thereby making them accessible to musicians worldwide.

⁹“Wenn der seel. Herr Musikdirectour Kirchhof aus Halle, in seinen bekannten Fugen über alle 24 Töne die Gegenharmonien vermittelst der Ziefern beständig angezeigt hat: so ist dieses deswegen geschehen, daß er seinen Schülern zugleich den Generalbaß und die Art der verschiedenen Eintritte eines Fugensatzes beybrächte” (Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge* [Berlin, 1753], 149–50).

¹⁰Gerlach's copy is dated “around 1733?” (*Bach Digital* [website], URL: http://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00000238?lang=de) and served as a model/master copy for Am. B. 531, which is in its turn dated from c.1760 to 1789 (*Bach Digital* [website], URL: http://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00000473?lang=de).

¹¹See Andreas Glöckner, “Die Musikpflege an der Leipziger Neukirche zur Zeit Johann Sebastian Bachs,” *Beiträge zur Bach-Forschung*, vol. 8 (Leipzig, 1990), 88–90.

¹²Compositions pour le piano-forte: sans et avec accompagnement par Jean Sebastian Bach... Leipzig: au Bureau de Musique de C. F. Peters [1839] (*Oeuvres complets* Liv. 4), 58–61, 14–21 (Anhang).

In 1950—despite the existence of a source denying Bach’s authorship—Wolfgang Schmieder included both polyphonic cycles in the main list of the Bach’s works and assigned them ordinal numbers.¹³ However in the latest edition (1998) of this important compendium, BWV 907 and BWV 908 were moved to Appendix 2 (“Works of dubious authenticity”—“Werke zweifelhafter Echtheit”) and deprived of their musical incipits.¹⁴ Since then, research literature has either directly referred the BWV 907 and BWV 908 as Kirchoff’s compositions or necessarily mentioned his name along with Bach’s.¹⁵

Today, the authorship of BWV 907 and BWV 908 has once again become a topic of discussion. Two factors are primarily responsible for this development. First, the last decade has seen a rich expansion of our knowledge about *partimento* practice. Second, in 2002 a collection of preludes and fugues by Kirchoff entitled *L.A.B.C. Musical* (c. 1734), in which pieces are notated as *partimenti* (in the same manner as BWV 907 and BWV 908), was rediscovered.¹⁶ This all

¹³It should be said that Schmieder mentions the correction in Am. B. 531, but he names Kirchoff for some reason as Gottlieb instead of Gottfried. See Wolfgang Schmieder, *Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1950), 519.

¹⁴*Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis: Kleine Ausgabe (BWV 2a)* / Nach der von Wolfgang Schmieder vorgelegten 2. Ausgabe hrsg. von Alfred Dürr und Yoshitake Kobayashi unter Mitarbeit von Kirsten Beißwenger. Wiesbaden, Leipzig, Paris: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1998. S. 464.

¹⁵See, for example, *The Langloz Manuscript: Fugal Improvisation through Figured Bass* / With Introductory Essay and Performance Notes by William Renwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28; David Ledbetter, *Bach’s Well-tempered Clavier: The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 355; Ewald Demeyere, “La fugue *partimento*: exercice ou composition?” *Les écritures musicales: Recherche et enseignement basés sur les pratiques compositionnelles*, J.-P. Deleuze & S. Van Belleghem, eds. (Wavre: Mardaga, 2007), 135; Malcolm Boyd, *Bach* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41; Florian Grampp, “Partimenti—Musik für Generalbass solo. Teil 4: Solistischer Generalbass in Nord- und Mitteldeutschland,” *Concerto*, 2004/2005, Vol. 21 (Dec. / Jan.), 32–36.

¹⁶*L.A.B.C. Musical*, containing, as its title page asserts, “preludes and fugues in all keys for harpsichord or organ”, was considered irretrievably lost for many years. The sole copy of the edition currently known to exist is in the library of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, given in 1870 as a gift by the noted musical enthusiast and passionate bibliophile Mikhail Pavlovich Azanchevsky (1839–1881). This “lost” composition by Kirchoff was rediscovered by Anatoly Milka, who in March 2002 brought attention to the uniqueness of the surviving copy and shortly thereafter prepared a new edition

However, if we look at contemporary scores, we see an absolutely different picture: not only “three-tiered,” but also “two-tiered” figures occur less frequently than the single figures, and diatonic triads are not figured at all.¹⁸ Such abbreviated figuring suggests that, in practice, many of the most common harmonic structures were handled by musicians as integer chords, and therefore were supplied with a minimum number of figures (one or two). For this reason the presentation of the subject in the original edition of *L’A.B.C. Musical* (mentioned above) has more than one figure on only the first two chords, and then only because they have altered tones (a sharp sign, which is then canceled by a natural sign):



Example 1b. G. Kirchhoff. *L’A.B.C. Musical* (c.1734). Prelude and fugue in D minor. Fugue, bars 12–16: original edition (p. 9).

In point of fact, the explication of such “conventional,” “abbreviated” figuring of the lower voice belonged to the first level of theoretical thoroughbass doctrine, which was sometimes presented as a set of rules:

Rule 7. When a second and a fourth are written above a note, the sixth is generally added [even] if it is not already written above.¹⁹

Some authors summarized all possible variants of figure interpretations in tables. We may illustrate this with the following table from Johann David Heinichen’s treatise *Der General-Bass in der Composition* (Figure 2). The upper row lists the figures one might

¹⁸The necessity for a second figure arises, as a rule, when a chord includes an accidental tone.

¹⁹J. S. Bach’s *Precepts and Principles for playing the Thorough-Bass or Accompanying in four Parts, Leipzig, 1738*. Translation with Facsimile, Introduction, and Explanatory Notes by Pamela L. Poulin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 20. (“Regula 7. Wann *Secund* und *Quart* über einer Note stehet so wird ordentlich die 6 auch darzu genommen wenn es gleich nicht darüber stehet”—Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach* [Leipzig, 1880] vol. 2, 922.)

encounter (“Gewöhnl[iche] *Signaturen* des *GeneralBasses*”). The two lower rows indicate the figures to be added in each case (“Die dazu gehörige Stimmen”).

	2		3		4				5			6					
Gewöhnl. <i>Signaturen</i> des <i>GeneralBasses</i>	2	3	#	b	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	6	6	6	6
Die dazu gehörige Stimmen.	6	5	5	5	6	6	6	5	5	6	3	3	8	8	2	3	8
	4		8	8		2		8	8	3	8	*8					*8
										*8							

	7							9								
Gewöhnl. <i>Signaturen</i> des <i>GeneralBasses</i>	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Die dazu gehörige Stimmen.	5	3	4	*5	5	3	3	5	5	5	3	3	5	3	5	3
	3		5	*5		*8	*8	*8	*8	3	3				3	
	*8															

Figure 2. J. D. Heinichen. *Der General-Bass in der Composition* (1728), p. 256: Table of Figures

Needless to say, the shorthand approach to figuring the lower part had its advantages: not only did it save time in writing, it was also faster to read, since one figure brought to mind the whole harmonic block, not simply the sum of its intervals.

Let us now examine the figuring of BWV 907 and BWV 908 as it appears in the Gerlach’s copy. One need not be a specialist to notice essential deviations from the described tradition. Thus, in Fughetta BWV 908/2 the passages with continuous two-tiered figures attract our attention, even in those patterns that are standard for the thoroughbass idiom and would work perfectly with a single figure. For instance, sequences of diatonic seventh chords use two-tiered figures, even though they are usually notated in such cases with only one figure—7(Example 2).



Example 2. Fughetta in D major (BWV 908b), bars 9–11.
(Quoted from *Fétis 7327 C Mus*)

It is also hard to overlook intentional “inversions” of figures for the repeated instances of the same chord. Such figuring does not follow traditional patterns.²⁰ So, for instance, in the first episode in BWV 908, the sixth chord is sometimes indicated with “6/8,” sometimes with “8/6,” while the triad with the suspended fourth is sometimes indicated with “4/5,” at other times with “5/4” (Example 3).



Example 3. G. Kirchoff. *L'A.B.C. Musical* (c.1734). Prelude and fugue in E major. Fugue: original edition (10–11).

These oddities of figuring can be explained as follows: in the Fughetta BWV 908, the three-part (obligato) texture is encoded with “two-tiered” figures (four-note chords appear only occasionally), and the relative position of the parts is coordinated with the help of figure “inversion.”²¹

Another peculiarity stands out in BWV 908/2 as atypical for *partimento* fugue notation. Traditional notation of *partimento* fugues employs a single staff and embraces a maximum of two parts. Thus, only one- and two-part sections of a fugue (if the latter consists of

²⁰The figures indicated only the harmonic content of the vertical line. Their textual realization (space of chord, melodic position, doubling, voice-leading) was always variable and could be changed from one performance to another.

²¹It is interesting to notice that in the first collected edition of Bach’s works, the figuring in BWV 907 and BWV 908 was everywhere unified. See Bach-Gesellschaft edition of the collected works, vol. 42 (Keyboard Works, vol. 5) (Leipzig, 1894), 268–75.

two neighboring parts) are written out in full. In all other cases, only one voice from the fugue's conjectured texture is written out, i.e., the lowest one of the moment. Therefore, the “look” of *partimento* fugue notation is that of a single line with figures, interspersed with occasional passages in two parts (Figure 3).

Figure 3. G. Kirchhoff. *L'A.B.C. Musical* (c.1734). Prelude and fugue in E major. Fugue: original edition (10–11).

In spite of the single-staff notation, the expositions in both BWV 907/2 and BWV 908/2 show fully-written-out counterpoint of the first three parts without clef changes.²² As shown in examples 4a and 4b, the figuring does not begin before the fourth entry of the subject, whereas it begins with the third entry in the overwhelming majority of *partimento* fugues. Indeed, the pattern found in BWV 907 and 908 is duplicated in only one other known *partimento* fugue—a fugue by Georg Friedrich Handel in his *Composition Lessons* (1720s).

²²This special feature was noticed already by David Schulenberg, *Composition and Improvisation in the School of J. S. Bach, Bach Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Russell Stinson (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 16.

Example 4a. Fughetta in B major (BWV 907/2), bars 1–9

Example 4b. Fughetta in D major (BWV 908/2), bars 1–8.

Example 5. G. F. Handel. *Composition Lessons* (1720s). Fugue in G minor.

However, the range of the Handel's subject is a fourth, while the subjects in BWV 907/2 and 908/2 have ranges of a ninth and an octave, respectively. It seems that the author of BWV 907/2 and BWV 908/2 was trying to "protect" these fughettas' expositions (as the most important sections for fugal form) from being realized homophonically. As evident from some authentic samples the normative characteristic of a contrapuntal fugue—i.e., the gradually amassing of voices in its exposition—was not obligatory in the creation of a *partimento* fugue. Thus, for example, the realization of the F minor fughetta in J. J. Hahn's *Der wohl unterwiesene General-Bass-Schüler*

(1751) shows that three-part, chordal accompaniment was possible from the third entry of the subject on (Figure 4).²³

Figure 4. G. J. J. Hahn. *Der wohl unterwiesene General-Bass-Schüler* (1751).
Cadance and fuggetta in F minor. S. 25.

A comparison of the notation of BWV 907/2 and 908/2 with that of Kirchoff's *partimento* fugues reveals one other interesting feature. In spite of the single-staff notation, BWV 907/2 and 908/2 aim for equivalent thematic elaboration in all registers; therefore the amount of fully notated material outweighs the encoded material (60% vs. 40%, respectively). In Kirchoff's fugues, thematic elaboration is found predominantly in the lower registers, resulting in a reversal of these proportions (see Table 1).

Harmony

Evidently, the earliest of Bach's statements about harmony is found in the Arnstadt consistory's proceedings from February 21, 1706. The leadership of the New Church had reprovved the organist for his extravagant choral accompaniment: "curious *variations*" and an excess of "strange tones," which confused the Congregation.²⁴ The harmonic strangeness of Bach's music, which occasionally astonished

²³The same manner of realization is found also in Fugue Exercise No. 5 (measure 6) in *Precepts and Principals* (1738), attributed to J. S. Bach. See *J. S. Bach's Precepts and Principles for playing the Thorough-Bass or Accompanying in four Parts*, 44–45.

²⁴See *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel; revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), no. 20 (p. 46).

Table 1. The percentage of fully notated and encoded musical material in the fugues from *L.A.B.C. Musical* (c.1734) by G. Kirchoff.

key of fugue	C	c	D	d	E	e	F	f	G	g	A	a	H	h	B	Es
volume of fully written down material (%)	≈27	25	17.5	≈33	≈33	≈30	25	≈18	≈32	≈45	≈26	≈40	≈24	≈45	≈30	≈37
volume of encoded material (%)	≈73	75	82.5	≈67	≈67	≈70	75	≈82	≈68	≈55	≈74	≈60	≈76	≈55	≈70	≈63

his contemporaries, has long been recognized as a typical feature of the composer's style. Even J. N. Forkel, discussing the peculiarities of Bach's harmonic language, noted that the "große Härten" (bizarre dissonance) and "sonderbaren" (remarkable) modulations are a result of the linear activity of Bach's voice-leading.²⁵

Acquaintance with BWV 907 and BWV 908 leaves a firm sense of melodic force having equal strength with, even predominance over harmonic force. Even the obviously chordal realization of the figured bass can not obscure the melodic energy of the individual voices—so strong is the linearity of their development, which shows its worth in both direct and indirect conjunct motion. As a result, strongly discordant chords appear in the course of the BWV 907 (Example 6a); spicy dissonances fill the entirety of BWV 908; a remarkable ("sonderbare") modulation from B-flat major to E-flat major appears in BWV 907 (measure 22), the transition to this closely-related (!) key being made by a circuitous route (Example 6b).

The image shows a musical score for a Fughetta in B major (BWV 907/2). It is divided into two parts, a) and b). Part a) shows measures 10, 34, and 35. Part b) shows measures 21 and 22. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat major), and a bass line with figured bass notation. The figures are: 7 4 2, 9 5 3, 7 9, 5 4, 6♭, and 6 5♭.

Example 6. Fughetta in B major (BWV 907/2), harmonic scheme:
a) measures 10, 34, 35; b) measures 21–22.

In the music of Kirckhoff, by contrast, our attention is drawn to the dominance of the harmonic forces. Indeed, the thematic material of his works is very often based on the principle of embellished or "quivering" harmony. In other words, the melodic quotient of BWV 907 and BWV 908 is higher than that of in Kirckhoff's music.

²⁵Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig, 1802), 27.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of musical style, it appears that the two fughettas, BWV 907/2 and 908/2, were indeed written by Bach. Reexamining *partimento* practice and the music of Kirchhoff that is now available leads us to reappraise the “Kirnberger puzzle.” All of the observations presented above argue in favor of Bach’s authorship. Nevertheless, the indirectness of the evidence should make us cautious about making a hard and fast judgment. Perhaps new findings will shed conclusive light on the intriguing questions raised by these two works.

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