

## 1. BACH AND INEQUALITY

### Introduction

Those who play or listen to the music of French baroque composers like Couperin and Rameau will be used to the style of *notes inégales* with which it is regularly performed. This involves playing the fast notes – usually the quavers and semiquavers – in an unequal rhythm. This was a style of playing that was clearly habitually used in 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century France, for it is often recommended in Paris music tutors of the time. This style had been in use since the 16<sup>th</sup> century as Swiss and Spanish authors establish (see chapter 3 of my *An Unequal Music*) and clearly became popular in other parts of Europe, though it suddenly ceased to be fashionable around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Scholars writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Arnold Dolmetsch and Robert Donington, began to recommend that the music of Bach and Handel should be played with *notes inégales*, though others argued that the style was confined to the French style, since the written evidence for it seemed to be focussed in Paris sources. However, today Early Music experts tend to restrict it to the French style, which would nevertheless include the music of Bach and Handel in this style.

In my youth I became absorbed by this fascinating subject and it has developed into a lifelong study. In my *An Unequal Music* (which is endorsed by Andrew Parrott and John Butt) I come to the conclusion that inequality pervaded Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, though some scholars still argue that it was not used in Italian style. Whether J.S. Bach used it outside the French style is therefore debated. However, my recent work has explored the possibility that both Handel and Bach may have played some of their Italian style music in this manner, as I illustrate in my experimental recordings.

### HOW TO APPLY INEQUALITY IN BACH

If the time-signature is C, 4/4, 2/4, 3/4 with running semiquavers, 3/8, 9/8 and 12/8 he is writing in the Italian style so play the semiquavers unequal. If the time-signature is C, 3/2, 6/4, 2, 3 or 3/4 with running quavers he is writing in the French style so play the quavers unequal.

Time-signature governs inequality in a similar way throughout other baroque music too – see Handel and Purcell, for example.

## 2. BACH'S HARPSICHORD MUSIC

### Introduction

A recent thorough reassessment of Bach's harpsichord music has convinced me (if I needed convincing) that he was a master of the instrument. He certainly knew how to use its virtues in his music – especially the crisp attack that made for precise ornamentation and clear counterpoint. But it is also becoming clear to me that the notation of this repertoire is full of clues that it was meant to be played with inequality and that this mode of performance was an integral part of the style that Bach cultivated. Here follow some notes on certain of his harpsichord pieces in which I have taken a particular interest (they are already recorded on the 2003 CD - see Introduction).

#### Fugue in D major, 48 Book I

If you don't swing the semiquavers here (from bar 9 onwards) they don't fit in with the overdotting that the prevailing dotted quaver/semiquaver groups naturally require (see Experimental Recording 13 in the website).

#### Allemande from French suite 1 in D minor

Here a legato piano-style approach would be inappropriate, for this texture, like many in Bach's allemandes, naturally breaks up into jagged 3- and 4-note motives and clearly responds to unequal rhythms. Sometimes, by contrast, (as in bar 2, beat 1) special phrasing is called for – here the four semiquavers should be split into two equal or short-long pairs.

### Sinfonia in D minor

In this piece *suspirans* are dominant.<sup>1</sup> In the opening motive a *suspirans* is immediately followed by a pair of leaping quavers, making a striking contrast between semiquaver inequality and the assertive equality of the quavers (see ex. 1.1).<sup>2</sup> (Bach uses this procedure in the opening of the 'Qui sedes' of his B minor mass). In bar 3 he arranges a bold 'question and answer' sequence built on *suspirans* and similar textures enliven the rest of the piece.



Example 1.1 Sinfonia in D minor (BWV 790) by J.S.Bach: opening

### Fugue in D minor, 48 Book II

Play the triplets in groups of six with the first note of each group slightly lengthened.

### Allemande from French suite no. 5 in G

Once again an all-legato *égal* approach would be quite unsuitable, for the melodic line falls naturally into short phrases. Bach's artistry shows itself when he develops these motives, as he does at ex. 1.2, a passage which needs inequality for its full effect. Take care to bring out Bach's important thematic statements (see ex. 1.3).



Example 1.2 Allemande from French suite no. 5, (BWV 816) by J.S. Bach, bar 16



Example 1.3 The above, bars 5-6

### Fugue in C major, Book I

Here Bach takes delight in contrasting the seriousness of the fugue subject with the unequal semiquavers of its 'tail'.

### Hidden melodies

A very personal part of Bach's contrapuntal skill are his hidden melodies, for some movements which appear to be dominated by semiquavers actually have a 'sub-text' in the shape of a hidden tune moving among them. This is demonstrated in the F minor prelude from book I of the 48 (see ex. 1.4). Here Bach emphasizes the first note of each group of four semiquavers by adding a crotchet stem to it. Thus a hidden melody is created. This procedure also occurs in bars 43-44 of his 'Dorian' toccata for organ (BWV 538) (see ch. 2 ex. 2.3) and bars 22-23 of his D minor 'Fiddle fugue' (BWV 539).



Example 1.4 Opening of Prelude in F minor, 48 Bk I by J.S. Bach

1 I discuss the connection between the *suspirans* and inequality in ch. 3 below and on page 128 of *An Unequal Music*.  
2 The contrasting equality of the quavers and the inequality of the semiquavers in the Italian style is a major theme of the writings of Hotteterre and Corrette that I treat in chapter 9 of *An Unequal Music*.

Yet this is not the whole story, for in ex.1.4, and the other examples that I have quoted, Bach is telling us how we should perform scores of similar movements of his where there are no extra stems to guide us. For instance in the C minor prelude from Book II (see below) the performer is invited to sustain the first notes of beats 1-4 of bar 1.

#### Prelude in C minor, 48 Book II

Bach builds this movement on similar 'hidden' crotchet melodies with strings of unequal *suspirans* in between the notes (see my Experimental Recordings, no. 18).

#### Fugue in E flat major, 48 Book I

The subject is meaningless if played *égal* yet inequality turns it into another hidden melody adorned with *suspirans* (see ex. 1.5). At bar 14 (beat 3) the alto starts yet another hidden melody: sustain the first note of each group and Bach will unfold an impressive descending chromatic scale.



**Example 1.5 Opening of fugue in E flat major, 48 Bk I by J.S. Bach**

#### Sinfonia in B flat major

Notice that most phrases start with a *suspirans*.

#### Fugue in F sharp minor, 48 Book I

The 6/4 metre is a clear sign that this fugue is in the French style and that the quavers should be unequal. In the frequent cascades of appoggiaturas (see ex. 1.6) the paired quavers respond well to inequality.



**Example 1.6 Fugue in F sharp minor, 48 Bk I by J.S. Bach, bars 8-9**

#### Allemande from French suite 3 in B minor

Here Bach builds a whole movement round the *suspirans* (see ex. 1.7): the bass part of bar 10 is a spectacular demonstration of this (see ex. 1.8). (See my Experimental recordings, no.14)



**Example 1.7 Opening of allemande from French suite in B minor (BWV 814) by J.S. Bach**



**Example 1.8 the above, bar 10, left hand**

### Sinfonia no. 13 in A minor

NB the syncopation in bars 33-34, 41-42 and 49-50 is very powerful when played with inequality (see ex. 1.9.). 'Rush' the demisemi-quavers in bar 36ff.



Example 1.9 Sinfonia in A minor (BWV 799) by J.S. Bach, bars 49-50

### Allemande from Partita 4 in D major

At my website no. 20 I play all the triplets unequal (sustaining the first note), phrasing the groups of 8 demisemi-quavers in fours (e.g. bars 33-34) and emphasizing the syncopation at bars 52 and 53. I play  like two triplets with the first note of the first triplet slightly sustained, which I believe was Bach's intention<sup>3</sup> (for more details see *An Unequal Music* p. 151).

### **Period sources on Bach interpretation**

#### **J.J. Quantz**

The much-quoted passage in chapter 11 of Quantz's *Versuch* of 1752 is a good introduction to his views on inequality but for more detail on the matter it is necessary to read the passage from chapter 6, section 1, paragraph 9, where he refers to flute tonguing as follows:

*In quick passage-work single tonguing is not effective, since it makes all the notes alike, while good taste demands that they should be a little unequal. This allows the possibility of using two other types of tonguing, that is, tiri for dotted notes and moderately quick passage-work, and did'll for very quick passage-work.*<sup>4</sup>

These types of flute tonguing need to be understood by students of inequality for they are the key to interpreting the *Solfeggi*, a late manuscript which contains Quantz's advice to his flute pupils. I devote the whole of chapter 13 of *An Unequal Music* to this source, for not only does *Solfeggi* introduce us to a more unbuttoned Quantz than the writer of the *Versuch*, but it is also full of quotations from real music by composers of his circle, like Telemann, W.F. Bach, the Graun brothers and Nichelmann. Below I list a series of passages which show Quantz training his pupils how to use inequality to enhance their playing (most of the composers quoted belong to the Berlin school). The references relate to the Amadeus edition of 1978, ed. Michel and Teske:

Concerto di Quantz, p. 11 throughout; Sonata di Nichelmann, p.26, lines 1 & 2 – (Nichelmann was a pupil of J.S. and W.F. Bach, Telemann and Quantz); Duetto di Telemann, p. 36, line 9; Concerto by W.F. Bach, p. 40 throughout; Trio di Telemann, p. 57, line 2; Trio di Graun, p. 62, line 9; Trio di Quantz, p. 63, Trio di Graun, p. 65, lines 3, 6-10; Trio di Graun, p. 73 throughout; Duetto di Telemann, p.76 btm. line and p. 77 top line; Trio di Telemann, p. 82, line 4; Duetto di Telemann, p. 83, line 9 and p. 84, top line.

It is important to bear in mind Quantz's standing in his profession, being the teacher of Frederick the Great (himself an accomplished musician). An article in *Early Music* (August, 1997)<sup>5</sup> stresses that not only was Quantz an extremely fine all-round musician with *avant-garde* aspirations but that what the author describes as 'Frederick's musical establishment' was an important meeting-place for the finest composers in the district, notably Telemann. What is more, the famous story of the writing of the *Musical Offering* proves that J.S. Bach was also a highly respected member of this illustrious group. So Quantz's advice on inequality is by no means only relevant to flute playing but also provides valuable source material on Bach's music in general.

3 I believe that the opening bars of the fugue in D minor from the 48 Bk II could have been written in this way.

4 See *An Unequal Music*, p. 161.

5 Steven Zohn: 'New light on Quantz's advocacy of Telemann's Music', pp. 441-461. For an illuminating excerpt from this article see page 167 of *An Unequal Music* (footnote 21).

## Recent research into Bach interpretation

### Hints in the musical text

The concept of 'hints', by which certain composers indicated to performers that inequality was required, is an idea that I owe to the research of Colin Booth, who found that Mattheson used this system.<sup>6</sup> I have also come across this procedure in Handel *e.g.* *Hercules*, 'Crown with festal pomp', *Ode for Queen Anne*, 'Let envy then conceal her head' and *Solomon*, 'Indulge thy faith'. See also Telemann's cantata '*Auf Christenheit begeh' ein Freudenfest* (1716) at the beginning of no. 8. I have found one possible example in Bach's *Fantasia cromatica e Fuga* (BWV 903), but this needs further research.

### Syncopation

Syncopation is one of Bach's cleverest secret weapons, and a movement like the opening chorus of Cantata 140 loses much of its power and subtlety played without inequality. In an *égal* performance of this movement the intended 'rat-tat' of the semiquaver-quaver rhythms of bars 5-8 (and similar passages) is lost. The syncopation in variation 25 of the Goldberg Variations is also spoilt if inequality is not used.

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6 See Booth, *Did Bach really mean that?* ch. 5.



### Tocatta and fugue in F (BWV 540)

The main theme of the toccata is particularly apt for the pedals, as becomes clear in the big pedal solo at bar 55 (see ex. 2.4). There is no question that those semiquavers that are disjunct must nevertheless be played unequally for the rule against inequality in leaping passages did not apply to semiquavers.<sup>8</sup> Corrette advised semiquaver inequality in 3/8 time in his violin treatise, adding that the metre was popular 'in the Italian operas of Handel, Bononcini, Pepusch, A. Scarlatti and Porpora'. To create a powerful thematic structure Bach cunningly contrasts his running semiquavers with a motive involving big quaver chords which he develops later on.<sup>9</sup>



Example 2.4 Tocatta in F major (BWV 540) by J.S. Bach, bars 55-56

The fugue is in  $\text{C}$ : Corrette says 'this metre is used in Fugues de Chapelle' and recommends unequal quavers.<sup>10</sup>

### Prelude and fugue in G major (BWV 541), see ex.2.2 above.

Corrette treats 3/4 as an Italian style metre in which the semiquavers should be played unequally. Bach wrote many fine movements in this metre.<sup>11</sup> This prelude is full of oscillating patterns involving hidden melodies: see especially bars 18-20 (manuals) and a spectacular passage in the pedals (bars 21-23). In the fugue Bach creates rhythmic contrast once again, this time by setting a subject dominated by equal quavers against a counter-subject full of unequal semiquavers. Note the pedal *suspirans* at bar 27: Bach develops this idea later on (bars 60-65).<sup>12</sup>

### Fantasia and fugue in G minor (BWV 542)

The fantasia features many demisemiquavers (see ex. 2.5) and clearly uses the advanced musical language that we also meet in the harpsichord partitas (e.g. the andante from the sinfonia that begins the second partita). The tempo in the fantasia is surely a *grave* in which the quaver pulse is dominant, as becomes clear in bars 9-12. I have referred to the famous fugue subject above (see ex. 2.1).



Example 2.5 Opening of the Fantasia and fugue in G minor (BWV 542)



Example 2.6 the above, bars 9-10

The semiquavers in ex. 2.6 should definitely be swung, for semiquavers are always unequal in C time.

### Prelude and fugue in A minor (BWV 543)

The opening of the prelude (see ex. 2.7) is particularly powerful when played with inequality, especially if the first note of each group of 4 semiquavers is sustained. The triplets at bar 4 must then be grouped in sixes (with no emphasis on the second of each group) in a way that I believe Bach intended  to be played. Surely the notation of bar 24 in the pedal part confirms that Bach intends this passage and the music that follows to be played unequally! (see ex. 2.8). In the fugue subject one would perhaps expect the melody notes of the sequence beginning half way through bar 2 to be on the *stronger* of each pair of unequal notes

8 See *An Unequal Music*, appendix 4.

9 These were first heard as a cadential motive in bar 81.

10 See *An Unequal Music*, p. 146.

11 e.g. the prelude from the second English suite (BWV 807) and the *praeambulum* from the 5<sup>th</sup> partita (BWV 829).

12 I explain the close relationship between the *suspirans* and inequality in *An Unequal Music*, p. 128.

(cf. the G major prelude to BWV 541, bars 21-23, pedals), though it seems that Bach deliberately enjoyed ringing the changes in such passages.<sup>13</sup>



Example 2.7 Opening of prelude in A minor (BWV 543) by J.S. Bach



Example 2.8 the above, pedal part, bar 24-25

### Prelude and fugue in B minor (BWV 544)

Though I played this piece 'straight' many times in my student days, I find it striking how normal it feels to treat the eloquent prelude with unequal semiquavers (see ex. 2.9). I would recommend a fairly fast tempo of about quaver = 80. The demisemiquavers need to be phrased in fours with the first slightly sustained and the others 'rushed' (this is the only way they will synchronize with the unequal semiquavers in bars 11-13). The hidden melody at the end of bar 3 and especially the syncopation in bars 4-5 are extremely effective (see ex. 2.10). No less is the syncopated counter-theme in parallel thirds that he introduces towards the end (at bar 81).



Example 2.9 Opening of prelude in B minor (BWV 544) by J.S. Bach



Example 2.10 the above, bars 4-5

This prelude is a fine example of Bach's florid late style and playing it with inequality requires a great deal of skill. The reader may like first of all to attempt an easier movement in this style, like the andante that follows the *grave* at the beginning of Partita 2 in C minor (BWV 826) for harpsichord.

The fugue is loaded with *suspirans*, see especially the new countersubject that Bach dramatically introduces at bars 59 and 61.<sup>14</sup>

### Prelude and fugue in C (BWV 545)

This prelude has even more *suspirans* than the previous fugue – indeed there is one in nearly every bar (see especially the pedal part at bars 24-26). The fugue is in French style  $\text{♩}$  and therefore requires unequal quavers.

### Prelude and fugue in C minor (BWV 546)

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13 Another case where Bach gives the melody to the *weaker* notes of a series of pairs is the first movement of the third Brandenburg concerto (bars 2-3), yet at beat 4 of bar 5 of the concerto the tune starts on the *stronger* notes and then moves to the *weaker* notes.

14 I can't resist comparing this prelude with Brahms's Rhapsody op. 79, no. 1. The key is the same and Brahms's triplet in bar 1 strongly recalls the downward scale with which Bach begins.

Note that both prelude and fugue are in  $\text{C}$  and (like the fugue of BWV 545) would require quaver inequality. I deal with the prelude in detail in *An Unequal Music*, pages 144-146.

#### Prelude and fugue in C (BWV 547)

To play this prelude with unequal semiquavers would certainly lead to an unsatisfactorily slow tempo and I suspect that Bach might have played it without inequality, though both Hotteterre and Corrette prescribe unequal semiquavers in this metre.

#### Prelude and fugue in E minor (BWV 548)

The prelude has a *suspirans* in nearly every bar. In the fugue the French  $\text{C}$  metre means unequal quavers once again. The falling quaver scale in bar 3 should probably be played with short-long paired inequality. In the episodes from bar 59 onwards the semiquavers should be treated like the demisemiquavers in the G minor organ fantasia and the harpsichord partitas and 'rushed'.

#### 4. THE END OF INEQUALITY – DID EMANUEL BACH PLAY A PART?

It would seem that inequality suddenly became unfashionable in Europe around the 1770s but there has been little research into this crucial moment of change.<sup>15</sup> For some time I have wondered whether Emanuel Bach, an influential figure at the time, could have had anything to do with evolving the new classical style. It so happens that in the 1960s I wrote a doctoral thesis comparing his style of composition with that of his father and I have lately been looking through it again in case it might cast any light on the matter.

Certainly some important things seem to have been happening in Berlin at this time and the Bach family must have been involved. In chapter 12 of *An Unequal Music* I stress that in his later works Sebastian started to cultivate the semiquaver triplets that were also becoming a feature of the *style galant* of the Berlin School at the time and which certainly create an atmosphere of inequality. Composers who wrote in this style include Telemann, Quantz himself, the Graun brothers, Benda and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, all of whose work is prominent in Quantz's *Solfeggi*.<sup>16</sup> Here Quantz's relentless recommendations for inequality in this repertoire could not be clearer. It is unfortunate that he only quotes very briefly from Emanuel's work and his father's music does not appear in it at all, though his 1752 *Versuch* ends with a piece that is very much in Sebastian's style (see table XXIV).

In *An Unequal Music* I list occasions in which JS Bach synchronizes triplets with duple notation (see ch. 12, table 1, p. 147), suggesting that they may indicate that he means *inégalité* to be applied in such places. I quote a passage from the B minor flute sonata (BWV 1030) which I personally find impossible to play without using unequal semiquavers (see ex. 12.7).

##### Important changes in the notation of Emanuel's early keyboard sonatas

In the following paragraphs I shall suggest that Emanuel's very early keyboard pieces, like the Prussian and Württemberg sonatas (Wotquenne 48 and 49) may show him using inequality while in some of the collections that followed, especially the *Sonaten mit veränderten Reprisen* (Wot. 50), the *Fortsetzung* (Wot. 51) and the *Zweyte Fortsetzung* (Wot. 52), we seem to see him beginning to adopt a truly classical style in which unnotated inequality did not feature.

His possible early use of inequality is illustrated in the opening *allegro* of the sixth sonata of the Prussian set (1742). This is full of semiquaver triplets and  $\frac{3}{4}$  rhythms which I believe would encourage the performer to play the surrounding even semiquavers *inégal* (see ex. 4.1)



Ex. 4.1: Prussian sonata no. 6 (Wot. 48) by C.P.E. Bach. Opening *allegro*, bars 53-57

In the first of the Württemberg sonatas (1744) the opening *moderato* is full of demisemiquavers and triplet semiquavers coupled with  $\frac{3}{4}$  rhythms which create a similar atmosphere of inequality. In the second Württemberg Sonata the third movement also has many semiquaver triplets which suggest that inequality is expected in the neighbouring equal semiquavers. Furthermore the first movement of the third Württemberg sonata has 'rebounds' (repetitions of the same note)<sup>17</sup> which may indicate inequality (e.g. bars 7-8 and 41-42). The second and third movements of the same sonata have many semiquaver triplets which also create an atmosphere of *inégalité*.

The *Sechs Sonaten mit veränderten Reprisen* (Wot. 50) seem to show the composer gripped by an obsession with elaborate contrasts of melodic rhythm (including strange *gruppetti* in the first movement of no 4). At first there are signs that inequality is still in force, for semiquaver triplets remain common, as in the opening *allegretto* of no. 2. In the final *allegro* of no.4 of the set, however, frequent old-fashioned semiquaver

15 See *An Unequal Music*, p. 13.

16 See *An Unequal Music*, ch. 13.

17 See *An Unequal Music*, p. 136

triplets are mixed with more *cantabile* semiquavers slurred in 4s, which might point to a more classical equality (see ex. 4.2)



Ex. 4.2: *Sechs Sonaten mit veränderten Reprisen* (Wot. 50) no. 4 by C.P.E Bach. Final *allegro*, bars 112-115

By the time we reach the *Fortsetzung* (Wot. 51) the modern style seems to be establishing itself. In the *adagio mesto e sostenuto* of no. 2, conventional dotted semiquavers (bar 1) are juxtaposed with even semiquavers which are clearly meant to be played equal (see ex. 4.3, bar 2).



Ex. 4.3: *Fortsetzung von Sechs Sonaten* (Wot. 51) no.2 by C.P.E. Bach. Opening of *adagio mesto e sostenuto* (3rd. mvt.)

Later on some dotted semiquavers (bars 18-20) lead into a piece of apparently legato two-part counterpoint in undotted semiquavers, which should surely be played equal (see ex. 4.4).

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Ex. 4.4: the above, bars 18-22

Yet the *allegro assai* and *presto* of sonata 4 are already in a confident classical style and could be written by Haydn or Mozart: there are no dotted semiquavers at all and semiquaver triplets are rare too. So the *style galant* seems to be vanishing now. Though the opening *allegro* of no. 4 of the *Zweyte Fortsetzung* (Wot. 52) is based on a *moto perpetuo* of semiquaver triplets, they are assembled in a truly classical style and are no longer just a mannerism as they used to be. It seems that inequality is now a thing of the past.

Yet occasionally old notational practices return, as when in the third movement of sonata 5 of the *Fortsetzung* we find Sebastian's old habit of matching quaver triplets in the right hand with  $\frac{3}{4}$  rhythms in the bass.

### Conclusion

The above observations seem to support a view that Emanuel Bach could have played a part in the demise of inequality in European music and thereby to have helped create the musical language that we can see expressed in the keyboard music of Haydn and Mozart as well as that of Sebastian's youngest son, Johann Christian. However we must bear in mind that many of the changes in this musical language would have been related to the *cantabile* style of playing, which was caused by the new popularity of the fortepiano.