

## **MUSICAL OFFERING**

*to His Royal Majesty in Prussia and most humbly consecrated by  
Johann Sebastian Bach*

*Most gracious King,*

*To your Majesty is consecrated herewith in deepest humility a Musical Offering, whose most excellent part itself proceeds from your own lofty hand. With a respectful delight I remember still the quite singular royal grace when, some time ago, during my last stay in Potsdam, Your Majesty condescended to play for me on the clavier a theme for a fugue, and at the same time most graciously obliged me to enlarge on the same forthwith in your own highest presence. To obey Your Majesty's command was my most humble duty. However, I noticed quite soon that, because of the lack of necessary preparation, the performance did not succeed as well as such a superb theme required. I consequently resolved and undertook immediately to work out completely this truly royal theme and then publish it to the world. This project has now been completed to the best of my ability, and it has no other purpose than this sole irreproachable one: to exalt, although only in one small aspect, the glory of a monarch whose greatness and might, just as in all the sciences of peace and war so also especially in music, everyone must admire and venerate. I make bold to add this most humble request: that Your Majesty deign to honor the present small work with a gracious reception, and that you further extend the highest royal favor to*

*Your Majesty's most humble servant, the composer.*

### ***The art of feud***

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Musicologists have long been fascinated by Bach's *Musical Offering*, one of his last and greatest instrumental works. Its 16 movements are based on a theme given to Bach by Frederick the Great during a visit to the Prussian court in Potsdam. But critical to an understanding of the work, is what Bach buried in the score: a devastating attack on everything that Frederick stood for and on the aesthetic ideals of the Enlightenment.

Frederick was a musician and composer of some skill as well as an avid collector of talent. He had been badgering his chief keyboard player, Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach, to lure his father to Potsdam for a visit for several years—until finally the "old Bach," as he was by then known, could no longer politely resist. Bach was then 62 years old, only three years from his death, and the long trip from Leipzig would be his last journey.

In many ways, the King and the composer faced each other as the embodiments of warring values. Bach was a devout Lutheran householder who had fathered 20 children with two wives; one had left him a widower, the second was waiting for him at home. Frederick, a bisexual misanthrope in a childless, political marriage, was a lapsed Calvinist who held all religions in contempt. Bach wrote and spoke German. Frederick, who like all German princes had been educated in French, boasted that he had "never read a German book".

Nowhere were they more different than in their attitudes toward music. Bach represented church music, especially the "learned counterpoint" of canon and fugue, a centuries-old craft that by now had developed such esoteric theories and procedures that some of its practitioners saw themselves as the custodians of a quasi-divine art.

Frederick and the generation of Bach's sons were having none of that. They denigrated counterpoint as the vestige of an outworn aesthetic, extolling instead the "natural and delightful" in music, by which they meant the easier pleasure of song, the harmonic ornamentation of a single line of melody.

For Bach this new, so-called "*galant*" style, with all its lovely figures and stylish grace, was full of emptiness. Bach's cosmos was one in which the planets themselves played the ultimate harmony, a tenet that had been unquestioned since the "sacred science" of Pythagoras; composing and performing music was for him and his musical ancestors a deeply spiritual enterprise.

For Frederick and his generation, the goal of music was simply to be "agreeable," an entertainment and a diversion. Frederick despised music that, as he put it, "smells of the church," and in the disenchanting world of the Enlightenment, cosmic notions like the "music of the spheres" were just more dark-age mumbo jumbo. In short, Bach was a father of the late Baroque, and Frederick was a son of the early Enlightenment, and few father-son conflicts have ever been more pointed.

What happened the evening they met is, thanks to contemporary reports, fairly clear. Frederick gave Bach a complex theme of 21 notes and asked him to use it as the basis of an extemporaneous three-part fugue. It was a fiendishly difficult subject for development in counterpoint—so difficult, in fact, that Arnold Schoenberg, the greatest practitioner of counterpoint in the 20th century, wrote an article in 1950 that set forth the theory that the "Royal Theme" could only have been devised by Bach's son CPE, the only musician present with enough understanding of counterpoint to trump his father's.

Whoever the composer of the subject may have been, though, Bach managed to foil him, improvising a fugue that incorporated Frederick's theme no fewer than 12 times (the transcription of which became the first movement of the *Musical Offering*). Such a feat was, and is, almost unthinkable; certainly no one else in that night's audience could have managed it, and that audience was Frederick's entire chamber ensemble, which included some of the age's foremost composers and virtuosi.

Frederick's next request must have been breathtaking to such a group. Since Bach had done so well with the three-part fugue, the king wondered if Bach might improvise a six-part fugue on the theme. Even though he had never even written a six-part fugue for keyboard, Bach immediately demurred. A very proud man who had never had to turn aside such a challenge, he had every reason to leave the court fuming, but he would have his say.

A Lutheran cantor, Bach had spent his entire professional life writing music for the church, which meant, by the mandate of Luther himself, composing music not from aesthetic imperatives alone but to communicate theological material. To do this, Baroque composers had recourse to a large vocabulary of so-called "musical-rhetorical figures"—ascending passages that could be used to signify resurrection, or hope, or happiness; descending figures that could communicate grief, or sorrow, death; and any number of other forms and rhythms to indicate a huge range of meanings and feelings (what Baroque composers called "affections").

Along with the many rhetorical figures in the *Musical Offering* are other aspects that sit very oddly in a piece ostensibly written to glorify the Prussian king. To begin with, the dedication was in German, where a polite dedication would have been in French. It began: "To Your Majesty is hereby consecrated in deepest submission a Musical Offering ..."

Translators have often rendered the German verb *weihen* as "dedicated" because "consecrated" simply sounds wrong, but the meaning of *weihen* was clear: "to consecrate". Bach knew that Frederick had no patience for organised religion, especially Christianity, so why would he have made his dedication sound less appropriate for a piece of music than for a ritual slaughter?

Bach often used key changes to connote specific meanings, and in a section of the piece meant to "exalt" the "glory" of Frederick by using some of the *galant* devices he loved, Bach ranges so deep into the deep flat keys—even past the five-flats key of B-flat minor, which was Christ on the cross in the St. Matthew Passion—that one wonders if he is working to let the King's glory shine forth or digging a deep, dark pit for it.

The trio sonata for flute and strings is the work's centrepiece, clearly meant for Frederick to play, but it is in the form of a *sonata da chiesa* (church sonata), and in Frederick's vast music library, there was not a single *sonata da chiesa*. Bach would have known that, far from appreciating counterpoint, Frederick specifically prohibited his court composer from using its learned style.

Yet in addition to the three-part improvisation and the six-part fugue Frederick had asked for, Bach italicised his own aesthetic preference with a flourish of canons, the most rigorous form of counterpoint. That took some doing since, as Schoenberg pointed out, the Royal Theme "did not admit a single canonic variation." Bach had to invent canons that could be placed around Frederick's theme, and this he did, royally. There has never been

a volley of canons like it. More than that, he gave Frederick exactly 10 of them. In Bach's work the number 10 was always associated with the law of the Old Testament, particularly in connection with canon.

Between the fourth and fifth canons are two epigrams addressed to the king. The fourth canon is an augmentation canon in contrary motion, meaning that the second voice is an inversion of the first and in notes twice as long. The inscription reads: "As the notes increase, so may the fortunes of the king." How odd, then, that the effect of this canon is relentlessly melancholy.

The next canon is the musical equivalent of an optical illusion: play it six times, and it will be back where it started only an octave higher, but without seeming to have left its original key. This canon is inscribed: "As the notes ascend, so may the glory of the king." But the magic of this canon is precisely that it does not seem to rise at all. What does that say about the glory of the king?

All of these oddly inappropriate elements in Bach's *Musical Offering*—and there are many more—are of a piece, and they add up to a very clear statement from Bach: beware the appearance of good fortune, Frederick; stand in awe of a fate more fearful than any this world has to give; seek the glory beyond the glory of this fallen world; and know that there is a law higher than any king's by which you and every one of us will be judged. Of course that is what he said. He had been saying it all his life.

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### Program Notes – *Musical Offering*

Bach's *Musical Offering* has long provided fertile ground for speculation concerning the ordering and the instrumentation of the various pieces. This is the result of two circumstances: first, the custom of his time in publishing contrapuntal music; and second, the fact that very few of the printed copies from the first publication survive complete and intact.

When the whole publication is re-assembled, it is clear that Bach had in mind a large-scale arch: first the Ricercar in three voices (the piece which he improvised for Frederick and his court, and then wrote down), in the middle the trio-sonata, and finally the *Ricercare* in six voices, with groups of canons in between. It is true that in the original printing the ten canons are *not* arranged symmetrically in two groups of five. However, that may be because the engravers fit two of them into places where there was space left over: the cost of paper and especially of the sheets of copper on which the music was engraved made it necessary to be economical.

For this performance we are using the broad outline of the original print: Ricercar – Sonata – Ricercar, with the canons divided into two groups of five (the "*Canones diversi*" are numbered "1" through "5" in the print, and so it is logical to keep them together). This is not to say that other orderings are incorrect, just that this one has been chosen for this occasion. And there is precedent for this flexibility even in the works of Bach himself. Another of his last works, the *Canonic Variations on the Christmas Song "Von Himmel hoch"* — which is in five movements — exists in two orderings: one in Bach's manuscript which progresses through variations in increasing intensity to a grand conclusion; and the other in the published version, which has the climactic variation placed in the center and the final two variations balancing the first two.

As for the instrumentation, many of the canons carry no indications. Moreover, the final Ricercar in six voices is printed in open score, one voice on each line — this was a common way to present polyphonic keyboard music in Bach's time; but in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries musicians who were rediscovering this music saw the open score without specified instrumentation and concluded that Bach thought it could be played on any combination of instruments. (The *Art of Fugue* is a similar case: keyboard music published in open score, which has been subjected to a variety of orchestrations.) There are, however, a few indications in the original. The trio-sonata is for flute, violin, and continuo (harpsichord and either cello or viola da gamba); and one of the canons calls for two violins and basso continuo. It turns out that this group of five instruments — flute, two

violins, cello or gamba, and harpsichord— is sufficient for all the pieces in the entire set. And that is the solution which we have chosen.

The “*ricercare*” are essentially just fugues, but Bach seems to have used the archaic term in order to suggest the idea of researching or exploring the possibilities for fugal development of the Royal Theme. He also used it to create an acrostic which appears on the title-page: “*Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta*” (“the music commanded by the King and the remainder worked out according to the canonical art”), the initials of which spell “*ricercar*”.

The Sonata for flute, violin, and continuo is a *sonata da chiesa*, in the four movements (slow - fast - slow - fast) as is customary for such pieces, but three of which is based on the theme proposed by Frederick. In the first movement the “royal theme” is merely suggested in the bass-line in the first ten measures of the opening section. The second, fast, movement is based on a melody whose outlines follow roughly the shape of the royal theme, but which is cleverly contrived to function as a counterpoint to the royal theme when it eventually appears in its original form, first in the bass, and later in the flute and violin parts. It is absent from the third, slow movement, but reappears as the main subject of the final movement.

The canons are marvels of musical ingenuity, but nonetheless beautiful music. Bach did not write out the music in full, but gave only one or two lines and then either instructions or merely a clue how the imitative voices must play. Most of the solutions used in this performance were published by Johann Philipp Kirnberger, who had been one of Bach’s last composition students in Leipzig before moving to Berlin.

The first of the “*canones diversi*” for two violins has a single melodic line: one violin plays it forwards, the other plays it from the end toward the beginning. The second canon (two violins and continuo) puts the royal theme in the bass, like a cantus firmus, with the two violin parts imitating each other (both in the same direction). The third canon (flute, violin, gamba) treats the theme similarly, except that it is heard from the flute. The violin and gamba parts are imitative, but in inversion: that is, the gamba line is exactly like the violin except that it is upside-down. The fourth canon is one of Bach’s most beautiful creations. The second violin (in the middle) plays an ornamented version of the royal theme, while the gamba plays a counterpoint which is imitated at half-speed by the first violin. The demands of the counterpoint create a deeply-moving and remarkably dissonant harmony that sounds more like the work of Schoenberg than of Bach. The final canon in this set (violin and harpsichord) gives the royal theme to the violin, with added chromatic steps, and the canonic imitation to the two voices in the harpsichord. However, a full statement of the theme and its counterpoint ends a whole-tone higher than its beginning; it is therefore necessary to play the music seven times over so that it can modulate from C minor through D, E F-sharp, A-flat, and B-flat minor and finally end in the original key of C minor.

The second group of canons begins with a two-voice canon (played by the harpsichord) bearing the heading “*quaerendo inuenietis*” — “seek and ye shall find”. There are four possible solutions to this one, and they are all heard today. The “*Canon a 4*”, played by the harpsichord and two violins, is the only one in this set that contains more than two voices playing in strict imitation. The “*Fuga canonica*” (flute and harpsichord) has an independent bass-line for the harpsichordist’s left-hand, and the canonic imitation between the right hand of the harpsichord and the flute. In the “*Canon perpetuus super thema regium*” the violin plays the royal theme and the gamba imitates the flute an octave lower and a measure later. The final canon, “*Canone perpetuo*”, uses a variant of the royal theme for the imitation: it is heard first in the flute, with the violin imitating it in inversion, while the continuo group provides a running bass-line.