

The nature of Bach's Italian Concerto BWV 971

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Introduction

The genre of concerto was favored by Bach throughout his life. From the transcriptions of Weimar to those of Leipzig (the former from other composers' concertos, the latter of his own), he presents us with a development of the *concertante* forms that both culminate and surpass the Baroque tradition: with his use of motivic counterpoint in the orchestral ('accompanying') parts, the ubiquity of *ritornello* material, textural variety *within* the *ritornello*, etc., he challenges the Baroque conception of the genre, based as it was on the strong oppositions of three basic dichotomies: *ripieno/concertino*, *tutti/soli*, and *ritornello/episodes*.

Seen in this context, the *Italian Concerto* emerges as an intriguing exception. All that raises admiration in Bach's orchestral concertos—the 'carrying forward of the genre,' to give it a name—is wanting here. The tale of historical progress, in which the Brandenburgs and their orchestral relatives fit so well, all but fails to account for the *Italian Concerto* in its earthly, unassuming, direct prosaism.

Perhaps this explains the scarcity of historical/critical discussion on the piece, and, more interestingly, the curious 'dismissive' attitude that emerges when it is addressed. Laurence Dreyfus, for example, writes in *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* that the first movement,

despite its size and form pointing to a real concerto movement, does not exploit the *ritornello* segments as do Bach's most advanced works in the genre. For example. . . , the *ritornello* formations . . . are strikingly more primitive than those of the Echo [of the *French Overture*]. With its two identical framing *ritornellos*, the piece seems positively disinterested in exploring the substance and sense of its segmentation. . . . The conventional recasting of the given materials . . . never takes place. The

lengthy ritornello itself evokes some aspects of the concerto style of Bach's younger contemporaries, such as Graun, Hasse, and even Scheibe himself, who, proclaiming the slogan of "natural melody," were indifferent to the capability of music to rethink its own materials.¹

More direct is David Schulenberg in *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach*:

While one would never want to underestimate a work of Bach's, it is possible that the novelty of the two pieces [in the *Clavier-Übung II*] exceeds their intrinsic musical worth. . . . There are even signs of a certain carelessness in the production of the volume, for the indications for the use of two manuals—one of the special features of the publication, announced on the title-page—appear to have been a late addition and are not always fully integrated into the musical fabric.²

Both Dreyfus and Schulenberg further discredit the work by quoting Johann Adolph Scheibe's famous praise (which I myself, though to different ends, quote below, see page 4). Dreyfus is suspicious of Scheibe's applause, interpreting it (with some reason) as a half-hearted "flattering" aiming at the "advance [of Scheibe's] own program which the Italian Concerto superficially seemed to support;" in the scholar's view, "Bach had intended to accommodate himself to his audience."³ In the same vein, Schulenberg states that the concerto, "shorter and in some respects more up-to-date . . . reflects not so much the style of the early Venetian concertos . . . , nor Bach's own orchestral concertos . . . , as it does the later works of Vivaldi and the concertos of Bach's younger German contemporaries like Quantz and the Graun brothers."⁴ Finding the piece strikingly uninteresting, Dreyfus and Schulenberg coincide in blaming Bach's (clearly inferior) audience. Gregory Butler offers an alternative explanation, not totally unrelated, but still distinct. Never quite expressing doubts about the quality of the work, Butler is nevertheless quick to 'explain away' the piece's simplicity, pointing to its alleged didactic nature: "there is an almost formulaic structural simplicity about this work that sets it apart from its orchestral counterparts. . . . These works [the *Italian Concerto* and the *French Overture*] seem to be nothing less than textbook examples of their

¹Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 230–1.

²David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), p. 301.

³Dreyfus, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–4.

⁴Schulenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

genres. . . .”⁵

Of course, what merits comment is not so much the different attempts at justifying the piece, but the need to justify it in the first place. Apparently, the *Italian Concerto* is somehow unworthy of its author, and Bach’s reputation has to be defended. (In a truly deconstructivist spirit, it would be said that the piece, after all, not only *is*, but also has to be kept—construed—as exceptional.)

In any case, the general dismissal, in the form of either silence or apology, is understandable in the light of the fact that, in 1735, having already composed *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Partitas*, the Brandenburg Concertos, and other such milestones, Bach decides to collect and publish this simple, superficial piece: it does look like a withdrawal from his “most advanced works.” But of course it is our thorough knowledge of and informed admiration toward the latter that create that illusion (cf. Robert Marshall’s warning that “his supreme, iconic stature renders us unwilling or unable to assess him or his music critically”⁶). We tend to forget that ‘advance’ might not always have been—was it ever?—Bach’s primary concern.

In the case of the *Italian Concerto*, for example, Bach might have been driven by the very interesting possibilities, the techniques, and the challenges, of ‘playing the orchestra’ from the keyboard. We know he had already done that, when at Weimar he reduced concertos by Italian composers; we know too that the natural following step—the transcription not of a piece but of a genre—was being taken, as there was at the time a generalized interest in the ‘unaccompanied concerto;’⁷ and, finally, we also perceive a similar interest in Bach’s own (and earlier) *French Overture*. The present essay is an inquiry on the *Italian Concerto* from that perspective. Paying more attention to the Weimar transcriptions than is usual in connection with the piece, and thus departing from the more common but misleading ‘nonstop’ comparison to the orchestral genre, I propose

⁵Gregory Butler, “The Aesthetic and Pedagogical Context of Bach’s *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto* BWV 971, Paper presented at symposium “Bachs Musik für Tasteninstrumente,” Dortmund, 2002.

⁶Robert L. Marshall, “Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography,” *The Musical Quarterly* 23 (2000), p. 500.

⁷See for example Monika Willer, “‘Sonderfälle’, ‘Modeerscheinungen’ und das ‘Normale’: Konzertsatzkonzeptionen in begleiteten und unbegleiteten Klavierkonzerten vor 1750,” in Reinmar Emans and Matthias Wendt (eds.), *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Konzerts: Festschrift Siegfried Kross zum 60. Geburtstag* (Bonn: Gudrun Schröder Verlag, 1990).

a history of the conception of the piece—a ‘biography’ of the piece, as it were—supported by archival and, I claim, musical evidence. If I am correct, Bach composed and abandoned the first movement fairly early on; later, he was reminded of it by his unpublished *French Overture*, orchestral in character, and then he proceeded to revise and complete with two more movements. The third movement, especially, shows the mature Bach at work, as it is a compendium of transcriptional techniques: in fact, when the piece is seen from the perspective of the transcriptions, in my view, it reveals itself as eminently Bachian—everything but an exception to the synthesis that he means for the history of music.

The literature on the Italian Concerto—the piece vs. the orchestral model

From Scheibe to Schulenberg

It is obvious that the *Italian Concerto* is related to the orchestral genre of concerto in a very essential way. The first document of the reception of the piece—the mentioned review by Johann Adolph Scheibe—is indeed little more than a definition of an unaccompanied concerto in terms of the orchestral model, followed by the claim that Bach has succeeded at realizing it (my italics):

Finally I must briefly mention that concertos are also written for one instrument alone, without any accompaniment by others—especially clavier concertos or lute concertos. *In such pieces the basic structure is kept the same as in concertos for many instruments. The bass and the middle voices, which are added now and then to fill out the texture, must represent the subordinate parts. And those passages which above all form the essence of the concerto must be most clearly differentiated from the rest.* This can very well be done if after the principal idea of a fast or slow movement is concluded with a cadence, new and distinct ideas enter and these in turn give way to the principal idea in varying keys. By such means, a piece of this sort for one instrument becomes quite similar to one for many instruments. There are some quite good concertos of this kind, particularly for clavier. But *pre-eminent among published musical works is a clavier concerto of which the author is the famous Bach in Leipzig and which is in the key of F major.* Since this piece is arranged in the best possible fashion for this kind of work, I believe that it will doubtless be familiar to all great composers and experienced clavier players, as well as to amateurs of the clavier and music in general. Who is there who will not admit at once that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a well-designed solo concerto? But at the present time we shall be able to name as yet very few or practically no concertos of such excellent qualities and such well-designed execution.

It would take as great a master of music as Mr. Bach who has almost alone taken possession of the clavier, and with whom we can certainly defy foreign nations to provide us with such a piece in this form of composition—a piece which deserves emulation by all our great composers and which will be imitated all in vain by Foreigners.⁸

“Who is there who will not admit at once that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a well-designed solo concerto?” Some 250 years have passed, and today’s refined eye is more skeptical of particular instantiations of ideal definitions. Schulenberg, for example, finds that the association between the *Italian Concerto* and the orchestral genre is, at best, not systematic. He points out, for example, that the *piano-forte* contrast (which at first sight is the main means of depiction of orchestral roles in the two-manual harpsichord) does not quite match with the *ritornello*-episodes scheme:

In the first movement of the concerto the episodes are scored mainly for a forte upper line with softer accompaniment in the lower voices. But there is also a piano echo within a ritornello (bars 67–68), and in the last movement both hands have forte passages within ‘solo’ episodes.

It is indeed not true, as Scheibe would want it, that the bass is “added now and then to fill out the texture” or that it “must represent the subordinate parts:” rather, we see it actively competing for the leading role in the third movement. The ‘echos,’ in addition, render the *ritornelli* less than “most clearly differentiated from the rest.” And these are only some of the inconsistencies that should be accounted for to maintain the assertion that Bach’s *Italian Concerto* is a direct mapping of the orchestral genre. Scheibe, of course, does not account for them; Schulenberg, on his part, takes the inconsistencies to *refute* the assertion:

it is probably a mistake to regard either work [the *Italian Concerto* or the *French Overture*] as a literal adaptation of an orchestral genre or the changes of manual as direct imitations of ensemble scoring.⁹

⁸Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus* (Leipzig, 1745), pp. 637–8.

⁹Schulenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

Ræthlisberger's insight

Half-way between Scheibe and Schulenberg there is an interesting piece of criticism by the Swiss musicologist Edmond Ræthlisberger (1858–1919),¹⁰ who wrote that

The view to be followed, at least the one I have followed to arrive at these reflections, is: the point of departure for the Italian concerto is to be found in the original scores of Vivaldi's concertos.

...

Compare [Bach's] transcription of Vivaldi's concerto [in G Major] with the Italian concerto, and you will be convinced that both are exactly of the same essence and form. It follows that the Italian concerto is in principle a concerto for one solo instrument and orchestra (in the genre of those by Vivaldi), whereof Bach wrote no more than a reduction for solo harpsichord, a kind of transcription much paler than the original conception.¹¹

Two things are to be noted here. First, the linking of the *Italian Concerto* to the transcriptions, rather than the orchestral genre. The consequence of this shift of focus is potentially very important: it opens a new door for the explanation of those inconsistencies that Schulenberg, for example, has pointed out. There are passages in the *Italian Concerto* that contradict the conventions of an orchestral concerto—this much is granted. But that does not automatically mean that they contradict also what happens in the transcriptions. In fact, it is the pursuit of this consequence that will lead me to my proposed reassessment of the nature of the *Italian Concerto*. Why did not Ræthlisberger himself advance along these lines? To begin with, it must be recalled that when he was writing (his book was published in 1920, a year after his death), only one of Vivaldi's originals, the one he refers to, had been rediscovered and identified. The revolution caused by discoveries such as the fact that Bach's four-harpsichord concerto was actually by Vivaldi for four violins lay

¹⁰I have not been able to find more information about Ræthlisberger. I run into his text almost by chance at the Library of Congress; as it will be clear, it proved to be inspiring for my own take on the *Italian Concerto*.

¹¹“La voie à suivre, du moins celle que j'ai suivie pour aboutir à ces réflexions, la voici : Le point de départ du concerto italien se trouve dans les partitions originales des concertos de Vivaldi. ...

“Que l'on compare maintenant cette transcription du concerto de Vivaldi avec le concerto italien et l'on se convaincra que tous deux sont exactement de même essence et de même forme. Il s'en suit que le concerto italien est en principe un concerto pour un instrument solo et orchestre (dans le genre de ceux de Vivaldi), dont Bach n'a écrit qu'une réduction pour clavecin seul, soit une sorte de transcription beaucoup plus pâle que la conception originelle.” Edmond Ræthlisberger, *Le Clavecin dans l'œuvre de J.-S. Bach* (Genève: Édition Henn, 1920), p. 83.

still in the future. There was little material for Rœthlisberger even to imagine the possibilities of his insight.

The second thing to be noted in Rœthlisberger's text, on the other hand, is that he deems the *Italian Concerto* "much paler" than a true concerto. While in Vivaldi the contrasts between *tutti* and *solis* are obvious, "in Bach's transcription, on the contrary, everything appears much duller, and the general effect remains vague, if one does not realize that Bach, when he played his transcription himself, evidently sought to render the effect of the original—that floated in his thought—reinforced the 'tutti' by means of coupling registers, and thus attained the characteristic contrasts of the orchestral version."¹² Thus, by appealing to 'the Master's intentions' (something that today we find amusing), Rœthlisberger finds a rationale for the use of the two manuals (i.e., the "coupling registers") of the harpsichord in the *Italian Concerto*. In fact, for him, it is impossible to make complete justice to the piece in the piano, unless perhaps transcribing it to simulate the coupling registers by octave doublings—a task for which he diligently gives directions. (Interestingly, Schulenberg is of the exact opposite opinion: "the concerto has [in spite of not having the splendor of the D-Major Partita or the depth of the Partita in E minor] nevertheless gained deserved popularity among pianists, for whose instrument it is better suited than most of Bach's harpsichord works."¹³) In any case, Rœthlisberger is too bold in ruling out a piano performance. But he is right when he realizes the very important fact that a transcription implies, foremost, a *loss*. The following section explores this notion.

What is it 'to transcribe'?

The general view of Bach's transcriptions as a whole is that Bach 'improved' the originals. This, for example, is what Pippa Drummond says:

... occasionally he imposes his own ideas on the original—enriching the harmony with suspensions, fitting in snippets of imitation, extending contrary motion scale passages, and adding

¹²"Dans la transcription de Bach, par contre, tout apparaît beaucoup plus terne et l'effet général rest vague si l'on ne réalise pas que Bach, lorsqu'il jouait lui-même sa transcription, cherchait évidemment à rendre l'effet de l'original qui flottait dans sa pensée, renforçait les « tutti » au moyen des registres de copulation et obtenait ainsi les contrastes caractéristiques de la version orchestrale." *Idem*.

¹³Schulenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

figuration to static bass lines. [In a passage, the suspensions he added] enliven the harmonic scheme and make the texture more varied.

... Bach's additions make the original more complex.

... it may be said that he imposed something of his personal style on the transcriptions. Certainly the arrangements sound utterly unlike the originals; nor is the change of medium wholly responsible. In the course of transcription, Bach has created orderly, 'artificial' works which have more in common with the solid traditions of German keyboard music than with the colourful vivacity of the orchestral concerto."¹⁴

This and other accounts, such as Dreyfus's ironical analysis of the transcription by Bach of a work by Prince Johann Ernst (which, "while charming, cannot be taken seriously as anything more than a flattering attempt to cover up the transparent harmonic poverty endemic to the original concerto,"¹⁵) leave the impression that Bach approached the Italian concertos, yes, with curiosity, but above all with a good deal of 'paternalism.'

When Bach transcribes at Weimar, however, he is not 'helping out' his contemporaries; nor, for that matter, mainly trying to learn the good things from their works in order to familiarize himself with an important genre. He is simply following a very long tradition, that stems from the ancient *intabulation*, in a way that, if perhaps arguably idiosyncratic, is by no means revolutionary. An anonymous fifteenth-century arrangement analyzed by Theodor Göllner shows *every* feature pointed out by Drummond in Bach's transcriptions, except for the suspensions.¹⁶ Bach transcribed also his own concertos, and in doing so he appealed to basically the same resources and techniques. The tradition, needless to say, would continue alive, as in Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven, or in Webern's *Ricercari*—in these cases, however, we are less compelled to use expressions such as 'enrich,' 'enliven,' and 'create order.'

The transcriber's enhancements respond not to a quest for complexity, order, or unity, but to the violence done to a work when its medium is changed. The comparison with translation from a

¹⁴Pippa Drummond, *The German Concerto: Five Eighteenth-Century Studies* (London: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 14–17.

¹⁵Dreyfus, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁶Theodor Göllner, "J. S. Bach and the Tradition of Keyboard Transcriptions," in H. C. Robbins Landon and Roger E. Chapman (eds.), *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Music: A Tribute to Karl Geilinger on his Seventieth Birthday* (London: Gorge Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970), p. 245.

language to another, though somewhat commonplace, is nevertheless accurate. Something is lost, not gained, when a work is translated or transcribed—the relative quality of writer and translator notwithstanding. The least we can expect from the translator is that he provides compensation for the loss, extracting it from the essential properties of the new medium. This—not a critical commentary of the pieces at hand—is what Bach is after at Weimar. (Fortunately, Drummond’s opinion that “the arrangements sound utterly unlike the originals” is completely untenable—should it be true, it would testify to Bach’s failure, not to his success.)

Röethlisberger’s position regarding the rendering of orchestral contrasts in the keyboard shows how he recognizes that the transcription implies a loss. But then his longing for the coupling registers to *directly* simulate the density of the orchestral *tutti* is little less than a longing for the orchestra itself, and therefore a failure to acknowledge that an essentially different medium is now in charge of the genre. Just as Scheibe before and Schulenberg after, he too is misled by granting to the orchestral genre too consequential a role in his account of the *Italian Concerto*.

A recent discovery

In 1995, Kirsten Beißwenger published an article on an enigmatic copy of the first movement of the *Italian Concerto*, discovered in the manuscript collection of Ludwig Scholz.¹⁷ The movement appears by itself, and with no *piano/forte* indications. Moreover, as Beißwenger argues, the differences between this and the published version are more substantial than what Scholz’s prudent simplifying habits (as illustrated by the other pieces in his collection) lead to expect. It is always dangerous to judge the quality or ‘finalness’ of an early version from the perspective of the definitive one, but in this case it seems safe to conclude that “perhaps we have the movement in a first, discarded draft.”¹⁸ The piece, at the time that Scholz made this copy, was unfinished.

There are no *piano/forte* markings in the Scholz version. But the *tutti/solo* differentiation is, as a rule, more clear than in the printed version: it is as though an originally transparent depiction of the relationship between soloist and orchestra had been obscured by Bach’s later additions and

¹⁷Kirsten Beißwenger, “An Early Version of the First Movement of the *Italian Concerto* BWV 971 from the Scholz Collection?,” in Daniel R. Melamed (ed.), *Bach Studies 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁸*Idem*, p. 17.

modifications, which include, naturally, the *piano* and *forte* indications. (At first sight, these indications are the main means of depiction of orchestral contrasts, and it is in a way surprising to find that they were actually not part of the original conception, and that in fact they *obscure* it.) As has been said, it is in part the inconsistencies in the *piano/forte* markings that raised Schulenberg's doubts about the *Italian Concerto* being an adaptation of the orchestral genre. A similar kind of doubt is identifiable in Werner Breig's opinion—reported by Beißwenger—that the piece cannot derive from an orchestral original because “the structure of the outer movements is substantially different from that of Bach's other keyboard concertos: it is not the solo/ripieno structure that determines the disposition of the material, but rather the performing medium.”¹⁹ But the Scholz version dispels all these doubts in a single stroke, showing that the *piano/forte* markings, the “performing medium,” are secondary to the nature of the piece.

But if these doubts are dispelled, and in addition this earlier version features a more clear representation of the orchestral contrasts, it is again possible to think that the movement is, after all, a “literal adaptation of an orchestral genre.” Beißwenger herself perceives this, and to that respect writes:

The more conspicuous *tutti/solo* contrast in the Scholz version could lend credibility to the possibility that Bach reworked a solo concerto, if it were not that other passages decidedly contradict this hypothesis (for example, mm. 105–21, with their sixteenth-note figuration in the bass).²⁰

I shall return later on to this passage, to explore Beißwenger's sixteenth-notes argument. But, before leaving the Scholz version of the first movement, let me highlight the two most important ideas that its existence and analysis have brought to the discussion. Firstly, this copy suggests that the first movement of the *Italian Concerto* is independent and different in nature from the other two, and in fact was probably composed fairly long before them. Secondly, it shows that this first movement is close indeed in nature to a transcription—closer, in any case, than one might be led to think by the final version (with its *piano/forte* indications and the other modifications). As we shall see, these two factors play an important role in the thesis about the piece that I introduce in the following sections of this paper.

¹⁹*Idem*, p. 18.

²⁰*Idem*, pp. 17–18.

The history and the nature of the Italian Concerto

So far, I have separately addressed several topics of the discussion on the *Italian Concerto*: different attitudes toward and arguments around the *Italian Concerto*, various opinions on its relationship to the orchestral concerto as a genre, the problems and goals of transcribing, and the suggestions of archival evidence. This has set the stage for what follows, where I propose a thesis about piece—more precisely, about how the piece was conceived of, which is at the same time a thesis on its history and on its nature.

To do that, however, some elements are necessary that have not yet been treated. Two are particularly important: the *French Overture* BWV 831 and the actual techniques and usages of transcription. The former provides the ‘circumstantial’ side of my thesis; the latter gives musical evidence in its support, and ultimately rounds off my description of the nature of the *Italian Concerto*.

A French digression

Bach published his op. 1, the *Clavier-Übung*, in 1731. The volume contained the six *Partitas*; excluded, however, was an additional C-minor suite that had been ready since around 1730, but which was too removed in nature from the other six: the piece was French in character, and called to that end for a two-manual harpsichord. It ended uniquely, not with the gigue, but with an ‘Echo,’ clearly composed to expound and exploit the contrast between manuals. This seventh suite is of course the piece that was eventually to be published as the *French Overture*.²¹

As quoted above, when Schulenberg discovers that the use of harpsichord registration in the *Italian Concerto* does not follow the orchestral conventions, he extends this judgement to the *French Overture*. But in fact the *piano* and *forte* markings in the suite are not only completely congruent as a system, but above all follow the orchestral uses rather directly. Schulenberg’s constant comparison between the *French Overture* and the six *Partitas*, on the other hand, is misleading: it is not clear why it should be compared precisely to them, and the sole fact that all of them are keyboard suites does not seem enough to make the comparison relevant. For example, Chris-

²¹The final B-minor version is BWV 831; the original C minor suite, part of the *Büchlein für Anna Magdalena*, has been assigned the number 831a.

tian Wolff writes that “the *ouverture* (suite) has no direct counterpart in Bach’s previous work in its imaginative exhibition of French manners of genre and style.”²² Interestingly, it is again Edmond Rœthlisberger who brings an important point home, by stressing the inner division of the genre of ‘suite:’

In the times of Bach, there was between the harpsichord suite (or *partita*) and the orchestral suite (or *partita*) a fairly sensible difference.

The harpsichord suite comprised an almost stereotyped grouping of dances, with or without a prelude.

The orchestral suite included above all a big prelude, the *pièce de résistance*. After the latter came the *musique d’agrément*, i.e., dances and small *pièces de fantaisie*. To perceive this difference, it is enough to compare Bach’s orchestral suites (titled « *Ouvertures* ») with his harpsichord suites.²³

Where does the *French Overture* belong, in the light of this distinction? It is of course a keyboard piece, but it should be understood as a specimen of the *orchestral* kind of suite. In fact, its greatest weight lies on the first movement, a feature that—among others—separates the piece from the six keyboard *Partitas* and relates it closely to the four orchestral *Ouvertures*. That Bach was aware of all this is seen in the consistency of his titles: this suite in C minor, still not named ‘French,’ is since the beginning called ‘*ouverture*.’ In general, it would have been very strange for this piece to appear alongside the *Partitas* in the *Clavier-Übung*.

The birth of the Clavier-Übung II

If the *Partitas* were not the best context for this *ouverture*, what could be a fitting companion? Well, another orchestra-like keyboard piece was the perfect candidate—and, of course, the seed of such a piece is exactly what that early F-major concerto movement was. Its style, in addition,

²²Christian Wolff, “Bach und die italienische Musik,” in *Bachstage Berlin* (Neuhaussen: Hanssler, 1985), p. 376.

²³“Au temps de Bach, il y avait entre la suite (ou partite) pour clavecin et la suite (ou partite) orchestrale une différence assez sensible.

“La suite pour clavecin comprenait un groupement à peu près stéréotypé de danses avec ou sans prélude.

“La suite orchestrale comprenait avant tout un grand prélude, la pièce de résistance. Après celui-ci venait de la musique d’agrément, c’est-à-dire des danses et de petites pièces de fantaisie. Pour percevoir cette différence, il suffit de comparer les suites orchestrales de Bach (intitulées « ouvertures ») avec ses suites pour clavecin.” Rœthlisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

further improved the fit: it complemented the French with the Italian.

This, I propose, Bach's the motivation to revise that movement, and to compose the other two to complete it. Thus, a sequel for the *Partitas*, in the form of a volume grouping an "Ouverture nach französischer Art" and a "Concerto nach italiänischem Gusto," came to existence. The 'national' opposition of styles, that had become a central part of the project, was to be furthered by the transposition of the suite to B minor (a tritone away from the concerto).

Regarding the *Italian Concerto*, the most important implication of this 'biography' of the *Clavier-Übung II* is that the second and third movements, unlike the first, were composed *explicitly* for this project. Indeed, that they are the result of a *different* project entirely, one into which the first movement was incorporated, but for which it had not been originally intended. This in turn implies a difference in nature between the first movement and the other two, and identifying such difference is therefore the main form of providing support for the thesis. As we saw, the first movement stands by itself in the Scholz version, and this can be seen as a kind of 'archival' proof; but, in my view, much more compelling evidence is to be found in the music itself. The following sections are intended to show that there *is* a difference in nature between the first and the other movements: the former is much closer to the genre of orchestral concerto.

This conclusion will be established through an examination of the outer movements in the light of Bach's early Weimar transcriptions. But the study of the third movement will in addition complement the picture by showing another important dimension of the piece: it is a—typically Bachian—synthesis, a *compendium* of the techniques and possibilities of transcription.

The first movement

The 'difference in nature' between the first and the other movements of the *Italian Concerto* lies in the question: 'could each of the movements have derived from an orchestral original?' I shall claim that, musically, the first movement *could* be a transcription from an orchestral original—that there is no refutation of that possibility in the music itself. But it should not be concluded that I that the first movement is in fact a transcription. I most definitely think it is not: extra-musical consideration to be mentioned later convince me that this is not the case. All I claim is that the music of the first movement could have been the product of a transcription—while that of the other



Figure 1: Bass line in mm. 105ff. (first movement)

movements could not. In *this* aspect, the movement is essentially different from the other two, and that is the sought-for difference that supports the history of the piece offered above. Put in words that will be more clear after my analysis of the third movement, the difference is that when Bach composed the first movement he set out to *imitate* a transcription, and therefore the movement comes close to actually resembling one (and could in principle make us think that it *is* one); on the contrary, when composing the other two, he was thinking of a keyboard piece. In this case he was *inspired* by the techniques of transcription, but he was not constrained by the actual reference to the orchestral genre.

Let us proceed by clarifying where we are regarding the question ‘can the first movement be derived from an orchestral original’? Schulenberg, as seen, does not believe it can. His main arguments, however, are based on the blurring of *ritornello*-episode contrasts, and on the characteristics of the *piano/forte* indications. But we now know that both things, the blurring and the markings, were later additions to the piece. The Scholz version, a more faithful document of the original conception of the movement, features a very clear (and clever) implementation of the orchestral contrasts.

After having made this discovery, Beißwenger had to face the question anew. She does not think that the movement could be a transcription either, but her arguments are of a new kind: the “sixteenth-note figurations in the bass” of, for example, mm. 105–21 (see Figure 1).

It *would* indeed be hard to find this kind of sixteenth-note figurations in the bass of an orchestral concerto. But the fact is that such bass figurations are found, not in the orchestra, but *in the keyboard transcriptions*. Talking about Bach’s transcriptions, Schulenberg points out that “it is at first surprising that Bach tended to add embellishment more frequently in the bass than in the upper part. But in quick movements the solo violin part could receive only occasional elaboration.”²⁴

²⁴Schulenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

This is true, but, in my view, there is more to it than that. It is not exactly that Bach, looking for some voice to ‘embellish,’ finds the solo violin already too elaborated, and therefore decides to elaborate on the bass. Rather, Bach uses the sixteenth-notes in the bass as a ‘means of compensation’ for something that has been lost with the orchestra: the contrast in density.

For instance, the first movement of BWV 976 (from Vivaldi’s last piece of *L’Estro Armonico*) has sixteenth-note embellishment of the bass *only* in episodes. In the orchestral original, in which both *ritornello* and episodes feature chordal accompaniment, the contrast between them is achieved through variation in density. But contrast in density is not a real possibility in a keyboard transcription. It is the use of sixteenth-notes in the bass that stands for it, fulfilling in the transcription the articulating role that variation in density has in the orchestra.

Similarly, when the bass has been embellished in the *ritornello* itself, Bach *avoids* the sixteenth-notes in the episodes, or at least treats them with prudence. This is the case, for example, of BWV 978, from Vivaldi’s Op. 3 No. 3. In the first movement of Bach’s transcription, the *ritornello* has sixteenth-notes in the bass; sixteenth-notes in the bass (except for one passage, mm. 41–45) are accordingly saved only for those moments in which the *basso continuo* plays in the original.²⁵ Also the third movement of the *Concerto in G* BWV 973 is illustrative: the orchestral unison in several *ritornelli* and *tutti* passages is complemented by Bach with a very virtuosic (and totally new) bass line. Of the episodes, on the contrary, only the last one shows sixteenth notes, and this clearly to the effect of achieving a grandiose ending.

From this point of view, then, the sixteenth-notes of measures 105–21 in the first movement of the *Italian Concerto* do not preclude the possibility that it reflects an orchestral original.²⁶ The

²⁵In the exception, the appearance of the sixteenth-notes coincides with a change in the original accompaniment of violas, which in that moment start a *continuo*-like figure.

²⁶One could perhaps make the case that the sixteenth-notes in the bass of the *Italian Concerto* weaken after all this possibility, not because of their existence, but because their treatment is non-systematic (i.e., only some of the episodes have sixteenth-notes), contrary to what tends to happen in the transcriptions. This is not the place to go into details, but it can be noted that the ‘real’ transcriptions are systematic partly because the Vivaldian originals are themselves already systematic in the relationship between episodes and *basso continuo*. The non-systematic sixteenth-notes in the *Italian Concerto* could have derived from a non-systematic (non-Vivaldian, Bachian) orchestral original.

same is true of another possible objection: the *piano* echoes within *ritornelli* that Schulenberg singles out. Echoes like these are fairly common in Vivaldi's and Bach's orchestral concertos, and they of course show up in the transcriptions.²⁷

This makes my main point about the first movement: there is nothing *in the music* that provides strong refutation to the possibility that it derives from an orchestral original. From the score alone, one would have to answer the question 'can the first movement be a transcription?' in the affirmative: yes, it can. As I said at the beginning of this section, however, this is different from answering 'yes, it *is*.' Like Schulenberg and Beißwenger, I do not think the movement stems from a lost orchestral concerto. The arguments are extra-musical: to begin with, there is absolutely no reference of any kind to such an original. It would in all likelihood be by Bach,²⁸ but then it remains to be explained why he transcribed for *un*-accompanied keyboard (the rest of his concertos, when transcribed, were transcribed for accompanied harpsichord). Why is the piece so different from the rest of his concertos in the first place? And, finally, why would the 'transcription' (the Scholz version) be so 'draft' in quality, if it was already a re-working?

The final conclusion is: Bach composed the first movement of (what would be) the *Italian Concerto* with the idea of imitating, to the last detail, the result of transcribing an orchestral concerto to the keyboard. This is something, as I argue in the next section, that cannot be said of the third movement.

The third movement

There are three characteristics in the music of the third movement that are irreconcilable with orchestral writing, and therefore make it clear that the movement could not have stemmed from an orchestral original. The first is a general prominence of two-part counterpoint that is at odds with the scheme of soloist and accompaniment. The second, related characteristic, is the pres-

²⁷The *ritornello* of the already mentioned BWV 976/1, for example, has echoes as a constitutive element. Bach even writes *piano* and *forte* indications—in this case not referring to changes of manual—which would in any case prove an easy target for Schulenberg's charges of incongruence.

²⁸Beißwenger, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Figure 2: The inverted version of the *ritornello* in the third movement

ence thematic invertible counterpoint between the hands.²⁹ In the third place, the *ritornello* of measures 93–104 has the top part transferred to the bass, an orchestrally unthinkable switch (see Figure 2).

There is no way to conciliate these characteristics with the idea of a transcription as we did with the problematic passages in the first movement. This in itself is sufficient to support the ‘biography’ of the piece that I have been proposing (the first movement composed early, the other movements added to it for inclusion in the *Clavier-Übung II*). But a further exploration of these three characteristics, and their relationship with the transcriptions, will reveal another dimension of the nature of the *Italian Concerto*. The first movement is close to the purely orchestral in a way that the third is not. But this should not suffice to conclude that the third movement is purely keyboardistic. The transcription stands in the middle of the two extremes (the orchestral and the keyboardistic), and exploring the third movement in relation to it shall prove illuminating.

The first characteristic is the prominence of two-part counterpoint. Looking at the transcriptions, it turns out that this is not at all uncommon in the finales of transcribed concertos. Vivaldi (and the rest) did not always end with a *ritornello*-form movement, but often composed a gigue-like finale instead. For example, the finale of Bach’s BWV 980 (transcribed from Vivaldi’s Op. 4, No. 1), is *entirely* written out in two parts, and in fact it would be hard to guess that it actually

²⁹Cf. mm. 25–32; on the surface, this is what creates the *piano-forte* incongruence pointed out by Schulenberg.

The image shows a musical score for an organ transcription of BWV 595. It consists of three staves. The top two staves are labeled 'Rückpositiv' and 'Oberwerk'. The bottom staff is the pedal part. The score shows a three-measure phrase starting with a box containing the number 3. The top two staves have a complex texture with many notes, while the pedal part has a simpler, more rhythmic line.

Figure 3: From the organ transcription BWV 595

comes from a concerto (and not, say, from a sonata or a suite).

Two-part counterpoint also arises in another context in the transcriptions: as a result of transcribing concertos for two soloists. These are usually transcribed for organ, each hand taking the role of one of the soloists on the basis of the *basso continuo* in the pedal.

But some times Bach transcribed *both* for clavier and organ. BWV 984/1, from a lost original by Prince Johann Ernst, is such a case. The organ transcription, BWV 595, behaves as expected (Figure 3): the *continuo* is in the pedal while the soloists engage in interplay on the manuals.

Now, what happens in the clavier transcription, where there will be obviously no *pedaliter* to play the bass? The answer is simple as it is revealing: the bass part is *omitted altogether*—and the passage becomes pure two-part counterpoint (Figure 4). Again, should we not know the do, it would be hard to believe that these passages come from orchestral originals.

The image shows a musical score for a clavier transcription of BWV 984. It consists of two staves. The score shows a three-measure phrase starting with a box containing the number 3. The texture is a two-part counterpoint between the two staves.

Figure 4: From the clavier transcription BWV 984

The finale of BWV 978 is also illustrative. On the one hand, it too resembles the finale of the *Italian Concerto* in being mostly a two-part movement; the texture is denser in the *ritornelli*, but in the episodes the focus is on the *bass* line—it would almost seem to depict a concerto for cello, not for violin. (The ambiguity comes directly from Vivaldi’s original, in which the *basso continuo* line is virtuoso in itself.)



Figure 5: Inversion of the *ritornello* in one of Vivaldi's concertos (as transcribed by Bach)

The most significant feature of this movement, however, is Vivaldi's use of a most unexpected device: in one of the *ritornelli* (mm. 119–22), he exchanges the roles of the high and the low registers. Figure 5 shows the resulting inversion (in Bach's transcription). Clearly, this is a precedent for the third characteristic of the *Italian Concerto*, the most un-concerto-like one.

Instances of two-part and invertible counterpoint are thus documented, even in *ritornelli*, in Bach's Weimar transcriptions.³⁰ In this way, precedents are to be found for even the most radically keyboardistic characteristics of the third movement of the *Italian Concerto*. What does this mean? It does not mean that the third movement could derive from an orchestral source: after all, this movement is *not* a gigue, the kind of two-part counterpoint is not the normal interplay between two soloists, and the inversion of the *ritornello*, unlike that of Vivaldi, creates what would be a revolutionary *continuo* line, even by Bach's standards.

Rather, the implication is that the movement is deeply rooted in the Weimar transcriptions in a very conscious and consistent way: it is a compendium of techniques and possibilities. Bach

³⁰They are not exactly 'thematic,' but this is natural on the view that baroque concertos in general, and episodes in particular, are themselves seldom thematic, but rather are composed of small motives and figurations in sequence. But the transcriptional devices that have created these instances would have easily created thematic counterpoint, had their originals been thematic. In any case, the clear distinction between the two parts of the counterpoint has been abandoned, and both lines stand at the same level of melodic importance. From this to real thematic counterpoint there is only a small step, one that on the other hand is very natural for a more thematic musical thinking like Bach's.

appears here preoccupied not with transcription as a keyboard reference to the orchestra, but with transcription *in itself*—with that which transcription, and only transcription, means to the keyboard.

Conclusion

This is, as I see it, the nature of the *Italian Concerto* (as a three-movement, 1730s project): an encyclopedic compendium of the possibilities of the task of transcribing, further realized beyond what the actual transcription usually calls for. Displacement of the bass, treatment of both hands as soloists with an imaginary orchestral accompaniment, inversion of the whole texture—all these are devices that could only be created on the keyboard and for the keyboard, but whose embryonic idea could only have been tasted when transcribing an orchestra.

The resulting synthesis is, on the surface, relatively autonomous from the genre of concerto. At first sight Schulenberg is right when saying that in the *Italian Concerto* “a fairly realistic evocation of the orchestral model at the outset” is evidently overcome by “the urge toward free development.”³¹ As I have tried to show, free development does not overcome, but complements and completes—in fact, develops—the ‘realistic evocation’ of the first movement. Bach’s urge, typical of his mature period, was toward completeness.

A word on the second movement

My argument has progressed with no reference to the second movement. This last section, almost an appendix, is simply the incorporation of this movement into the model that emerged in the main body of the present essay. My general thesis implies that the second movement is more akin to the third than to the first, in the sense that it was conceived of long after the latter, with the conscious goal of completing it for publication in the *Clavier-Übung II*. The middle movement does not provide the kind of evidence that was advanced in connection with the outer movements, not least because it is not a *ritornello* form. But on other grounds this movement seems to me to have been more plausibly conceived directly for the keyboard, rather than as a transcription.

The first thing to note is the absence of the bass from the downbeat in the accompanying pattern

³¹Schulenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 303.



Figure 6: The accompanying pattern of the second movement.

(that remains consistent throughout the movement; the first two measures are shown in Figure 6). It is simply unthinkable that a Baroque orchestral bass (with the added weight, not only timbrical but also harmonic, of the *basso continuo*) be composed off-beat in such a way. It can be safely assumed that an orchestral original, if it existed, would affirm the downbeat with the bass. This raises a first problem: what is there to sound in the second and third eighth-notes of the measure (which are taken by the bass in the keyboard)? The only sensible conjecture is that the bass note would be repeated throughout the measure—let us say by the viola. So: the continuo has the bass note, the viola repeats it, and the violins have the top parts. But as the movement advances, this hypothetical pattern of an original accompaniment becomes unrealistic. The bass itself raises many questions of register, but in any case the top parts descend well beyond the range of the violin (as much as a seventh). No strategic change of octave do: the smoothness of the line would be destroyed, and the accompaniment would cross the soloist.³² In general, the progression of these voices as they stand in the keyboard version makes so perfect sense, that it seems almost unescapable to conclude that they were conceived directly as they appear there. The only credible supposition is that Bach set to produce something closely resembling an orchestral second movement (his intuition suggested him something very similar to the A-minor *Violin Concerto* BWV 1041 as a starting point), but was the whole time composing a keyboard piece. The texture and the particular registration to use (*piano* for the left hand, *forte* for the other) was all that the orchestral model fixed—beyond that, he was ‘free.’

³²In concrete: transposing these voices up an octave from m. 35 to the end would be acceptable for those voices themselves, but the crossing in mm. 45ff. would be unacceptable. Even transposing just the lower voice, thus creating a movement in parallel sixths rather than thirds, is not enough to avoid the crossing. In the previous problematic passage, mm. 17–28, there is no good chance to transpose up without doing violence to the melodies.

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