Performing Bach's Keyboard Music — Phrasing

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BECAUSE of the ambiguity of the often loosely used word "phrasing," it would seem proper to define the term:

> Phrasing signifies the artistically sensible division of the musical line (comparable to that of the punctuational division of speech); the act of shaping the phrase (the dynamic organization of the tones within it according to their pitches, metro-rhythmical relationships, and their real or implied harmonies); and the consideration of the relationship of any given phrase to the phrases preceding and following it.

As in speech, one separates musical phrases by "breathing." In piano playing this is accomplished by picking up the hand. In speaking, one makes a rather clear distinction between commas, semicolons, and periods. The length of the "break" in keyboard performance depends solely upon the *musical* sense.

Phrasing was not directly indicated by Bach. In those rare instances where slurs are found in his keyboard music, they indicate "legato," not "phrasing." Unfortunately, contemporary authors have not written anything more or less perspicuous concerning Bach phrasing, which must still be figured out from the melodic line and the texture as a whole. Although Hermann Keller writes that there is "mostly only one correct phrasing but many possibilities of articulation,"[1] Bach authorities often disagree concerning both articulation and phrasing.

Ludwig Czaczkes' statement that Bach performers face incredibly difficult decisions regarding the delimitations of motives, phrases, and periods is certainly true.[2] Frequently, the phrasing is inherent in the construction of Bach's line. Phrases are naturally separated from one another either by an interval wider than seems to be logical within one phrase in a given context, by sequented progression, or by a repeated rhythmical pattern (when there is no doubt about a "comma" between phrases). In rare cases, the fingerings of Baroque performers (preserved in some manuscripts) are helpful.

Still, it is rather difficult to determine the exact point of the separation of one phrase from another in polyphonic music — especially when the voice lines appear to be endless. In such cases, one may find several

equally plausible solutions — that is, points at which one "feels" that one phrase ends and another begins.

When phrases are separated by an interval not wider than a second and the artistic purpose requires a smooth flow in the music, the separation could be made clear by a very subtle, hardly perceptible stress on the first note of the second phrase, rather than through the more obvious "picking up of the hand" to indicate punctuation. This procedure allows the performer to "feel" separation without realizing it physically. Several points in the C-major *Invention* [measures 3 and 4] call for this type of phrasing.

Bach's music, whether built up in long periods or in minute cells, is most often iambically constructed. Thus, the phrase endings are strong and masculine. Exceptions to this type of construction are comparatively rare. Much attention should be given to the metrical placement of such phrases.

Some musicians, instead of emphasizing the simple straightforward quality of Bach's line, prefer to indulge in a more elaborate shaping of phrases. Such a division of long polyphonic development into small sections with soft sentimental endings is, however, quite un-Bachian. The persistent placement of diminuendos toward the end of phrases closing on strong beats transforms these phrases from iambic (masculine) into trochaic (feminine) ones and gives to the piece an unsuitable sentimentality. (See Examples 1 and 2.) In these examples the iambic phrases are marked by brackets; parentheses point out the dynamic shaping which distorts the essence of the music.

Some contemporary editors choose to indicate a kind of "phrasing within phrasing" in their Bach editions. This intricate method of phrase indication reminds one in some ways of the notorious, now completely rejected, editions of Hugo Riemann. (See Example 3.) The triple slurs clutter the score. The two longer slurs are supposed to indicate the *whole* subject and, also, *half* of the subject. The shorter slurs (indicating "inner phrasing") crush the phrase. No matter how delicately such phrases might be realized, the result would almost certainly be an un-Bachian style in which lines were dissected in a very "mannered" way.

Some musicologists — Ernst Kurth and Igor Glebov [Boris Asafiev], for instance — are of the opinion that Bach's musical line is free from a system or regular metrical accentuation, free from symmetry. They believe that Bach's line is subjected to the tension and relaxation of the melodic flow itself and "takes, as dynamic factor in the process, evident preponderance over the significance of the bar line."[3] Out of this kind of analysis

evolves the theory of "polyphonic accents" in Bach playing (accents horizontal, rather than vertical; kinetic and motor, rather than heavy and step-wise).

The writer does not share the theory that Bach's music is alien to the metro-rhythmical structure. There are cases, however, where the tension of Bach's horizontal line overbalances the significance of the metrical division. (See Example 4.)

An example (often referred to) is the C-major fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I,* where the shifting of the subject *seemingly* obliterates the bar lines. Upon close analysis, one realizes that these necessary displacements are observed only in several stretto sections and, thus, do not prove the point.

Edward Cone speaks of the regularity of metrical pulse as the most characteristic and important feature of the age of Bach and Handel, describing a "hierarchy of events" where everything from longer motives to minute subdivisions of the beat is under strict metrical control.[4]

Speaking of the metric play in Bach's *Prelude in C Major* (*Well-Tempered Clavier, Bk. I, No. 1*) Cone says: "The motivic cross-rhythm mentioned above is a small example of the way metrical ambiguities are used to advantage to offset an otherwise unrelieved squareness."[5]

Concerning the performance of such pieces, Cone states that the performer's "orientation within the measure should be effected more by the actual musical profile than by applied accentuation, which," he goes on to state, "[was], after all, unavailable on two of Bach's favorite instruments."[6] Here, one might argue that since dynamic accentuation was impossible on these instruments, most certainly the necessary accentuation was achieved by agogic means — that is, by effecting the slightest prolongation or delay upon the note to be stressed.

Frederick Dorain states the rhythmic ideals of Renaissance music as "free declamation, independence of meter, and superiority of the melos over the bars."[7] Certainly these ideals characterize the music of the Renaissance more than that of the late Baroque. Bach's melodic line may be long and flowing and his phrasing not easily tractable. Nevertheless, Bach's lines are mostly bound by the iron discipline of their meter. Bach knew very well how to place his phrases in connection with metrical units. To be sure, accents applied to his music should be measured most meticulously — since an intrusive *sforzando* might well distort the polyphonic texture.

Of course, the above opinions (and their supporting examples) represent the extremes encountered. Fortunately, the listener more often

meets the conceptions which are to be found somewhere between these extreme points. As for the performer-interpreter — he may find it advantageous to mix and, at times, even to try to reconcile, apparently contradictory views concerning Bach phrasing.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Hermann Keller, *Die Klavierwerke Bachs,* Leipzig, 1950, p. 31.

[2] Ludwig Czaczkes, *Analyse des Wohltemperierten Klaviers; Form und Aufbau der Fuge bei Bach, Vienna,* 1956, Vol. I, p. 41.

[3] Igor Glebov [Boris Asafiev], "Preface" to the Russian translation of Ernst Kurth's *Grundlage des linearen Kontrapunkt,* Moscow, 1931.

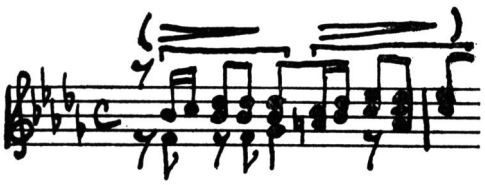
[4] Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance,* New York, 1968, pp. 59-62.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 66.

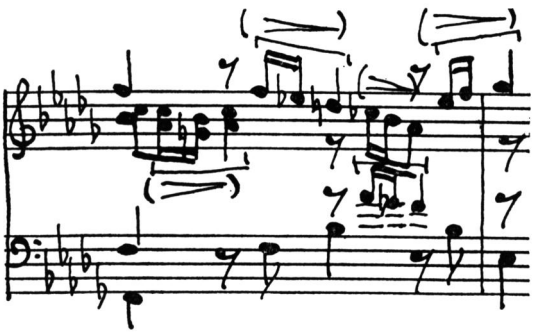
[6] *Ibid.,* p. 70.

[7] Frederick Dorian, *The History of Music in Performance,* New York, 1942, p. 258.

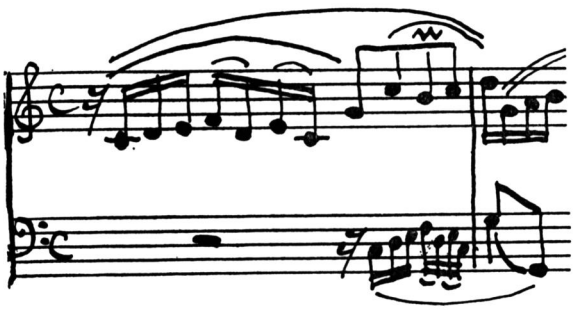
Ex. 1. J. S. Bach, *Prelude in B-flat Minor, Well-Tempered Clavier,* Vol. I, meas. 1-2, upper voices.



Ex. 2. *Prelude in B-flat Minor,* meas. 13-14.



Ex. 3. J. S. Bach, *Inventio I,* meas. 1-2.



Ex. 4. J. S. Bach, *Sinfonia in F Minor,* meas. 1-3, upper voice.