

Here's some background information on Bach's *Musical Offering* (*Musikalisches Opfer*) to supplement our musical presentation. The first part provides an historical backdrop for the work's inception; the second part is a guide to each component of the work, with musical examples; and the third part asks the question *what are we to make of this?*

I. History

Our program shares its title with a volume published in 2005 by the American journalist, editor, and author James Gaines. That book is an erudite but readable double-biography of Frederick II, King of Prussia, and Johann Sebastian Bach. The central element is Bach's singular encounter with Frederick at the Prussian king's palace on May 7, 1747. The underlying premise of Gaines' *Evening in the Palace of Reason* is opposition—portrayed most broadly in the pairing of faith versus reason. Bach represents the old: a God-fearing family man, devoted to musical and aesthetic principles of the past (as Gaines writes, “a stranger, a refugee from ‘God’s time’ displaced to a world where religion can be limited to a building and a day of the week, or dispensed with altogether”). Frederick is a troubled, depressive child of the Enlightenment, likely a closeted gay man, a brilliant military strategist who vastly increased the power and extent of the Prussian empire (in the process of which he also alienated the citizens of Saxony, including Bach). Frederick was also a student and practitioner of the arts and a devoted amateur flutist who surrounded himself with like-minded intellectuals including Voltaire.

The same encounter is also at the core of *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, for which Douglas R. Hofstadter, now a professor of both cognitive science and computer science at Indiana University, won the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction in 1979. Hofstadter sets the scene for that evening in May this way:

In 1747 Bach was sixty-two, and his fame, as well as one of his sons, had reached Potsdam; in fact, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was the Capellmeister (choirmaster) at the court of King Frederick. For years the King had let it be known, through gentle hints to Philipp Emanuel, how pleased he would be to have the elder Bach come and pay him a visit; but this wish had never been realized...It was Frederick's custom to have evening concerts of chamber music in his court. Often he himself would be the soloist in a concerto for flute... One May evening in 1747, an unexpected guest showed up. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, one of Bach's earliest biographers, tells the story as follows:

One evening, just as he was getting his flute ready, and his musicians were assembled, an officer brought him a list of the strangers who had arrived. With his flute in his hand he ran over the list, but immediately turned to the assembled musicians, and said, with a kind of agitation, “Gentlemen, old Bach is come.” The flute was now laid aside, and old Bach, who had alighted at his son's lodgings, was immediately summoned to the Palace... The King gave up his concert for this evening, and invited Bach, then already called the Old Bach, to try his fortepianos, made by Silbermann, which stood in several rooms of the palace. The musicians went with him from room to room, and Bach was invited everywhere to try them and to play unpremeditated compositions.

After he had gone on for some time, he asked the King to give him a subject for a Fugue, in order to execute it immediately without any preparation. The King admired the learned manner in which his subject was thus executed extempore; and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, expressed a wish to hear a Fugue with six Obligato parts. But as it is not every subject that is fit for such full harmony, Bach chose one himself, and immediately executed it to the astonishment of all present in the same magnificent and learned manner as he had done that of the King... After his return to Leipzig, he composed the subject, which he had received from the King, in three and six parts, added several artificial passages in strict canon to it, and had it engraved, under the title of “Musikalisches Opfer” [Musical Offering], and dedicated it to the inventor.

Hofstadter continues:

In the copy Bach sent to King Frederick, on the page preceding the first sheet of music, was the following inscription:

Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta

(“At the King’s Command, the Song and the Remainder Resolved with Canonic Art”)

Here Bach is punning on the word “canonic,” since it means not only “with canons” but also “in the best possible way.” The initials of this inscription are

R I C E R C A R

—an Italian word meaning “to seek.” And certainly there is a great deal to seek in the *Musical Offering*. It consists of one three-part fugue, one six-part fugue, ten canons, and a trio sonata. Musical scholars have concluded that the three-part fugue must be, in essence, identical with the one which Bach improvised for King Frederick. The six-part fugue is one of Bach’s most complex creations, and its theme is, of course, the Royal Theme... Both of the fugues are inscribed “Ricercar,” rather than “Fuga.” This is another meaning of the word; “ricercar” was, in fact, the original name for the musical form now known as “fugue.” By Bach’s time, the word “fugue” (or *fuga*, in Latin and Italian) had become standard, but the term “ricercar” had survived, and now designated an erudite kind of fugue, perhaps too austere intellectually for the common ear... The trio sonata forms a delightful relief from the austerity of the fugues and canons, because it is very melodious and sweet, almost danceable. Nevertheless, it too is based largely on the King’s theme, chromatic and austere as it is. It is rather miraculous that Bach could use such a theme to make so pleasing an interlude.

The ten canons in the *Musical Offering* are among the most sophisticated canons Bach ever wrote. However, curiously enough, Bach himself never wrote them out in full. This was deliberate. They were posed as puzzles to King Frederick. It was a familiar musical game of the day to give a single theme, together with some more or less tricky hints, and to let the canon based on that theme be “discovered” by someone else.

II. Movements

Throughout the *Musical Offering* Bach employs the most basic of musical devices—canon, or the imitation of one voice by another (as in a round; think “Three Blind Mice” or “Frère Jacques”). He makes use of this technique in astonishing ways. At the heart of everything is the Royal Theme (RT), the tune supposedly dictated by Frederick:



Here follows a brief roadmap to the movements of the *Musical Offering*. Musical examples show permutations of the Royal Theme when they differ appreciably from the original version.

Ricercar a 3 (3-part ricercar). This movement appears first in the presentation copy for King Frederick, and in a format that suggests keyboard realization. This perhaps represents Bach’s original improvisation on the Royal Theme in the King’s presence. The theme itself, heard at the outset, appears ten times in the course of the movement.

Canon perpetuus super thema regium (Perpetual canon on the royal theme). The first of five canons (we’ll call them Group A) in which an accompanying voice to the RT is treated canonically (in the Group B canons, it is the Royal Theme itself that is canonized). The flute and cello here play the accompaniment; the violin presents a slightly altered version of the RT:



Canones diversi super thema regium (Diverse canons on the Royal Theme). The five Group B canons are presented as a set:

Canon a 2, cancrizans (2-part crab canon). Cancrizans means “crab,” an animal that appears to move sideways. Its musical equivalent is a single line of music, here starting with the RT, so constructed that it can be played against itself backwards: the accompanying voice at the outset is in fact the same voice, played in reverse. This canon works well on a two-manual harpsichord, one manual for each voice. It will be played first as a single-line entity, then as a canon.

Canon a 2 in unisono (2-part canon at the unison). The RT is heard in the bass; the voices above it are identical but the second begins a measure after the first. (violin, harpsichord)

Canon a 2 per motum contrarium (2-part canon in contrary motion). The RT appears here on top; the accompaniment appears next, followed two beats later by the same accompaniment upside-down. (flute, harpsichord)

Canon a 2 per augmentationem, contrario motu (2-part canon in augmentation and contrary motion). An ornamented version of the RT is sandwiched by accompaniments above and below. The upper one is upside down (*contrario motu*) and twice as slow (*augmentationem*). It is perhaps the most intricate canon, and a hard one to perceive aurally. In the margin of the presentation copy Bach inscribed *Notulis crescentibus crescat Fortuna Regis* (“As the notes grow, so may the King’s fortune”), a playful reference to the expansion of the tune. Here is the beginning of the “riddle” version of this canon as presented by Bach. The two clefs at the beginning of the lower line (the second upside down), together with the tiny sign beneath the fifth note, convey where and when the second voice (the one moving at half speed) should begin.

Here is the beginning of the solution, written out. As we’re doing it, the violin plays the RT (for ease of reading we’ve switched this to the top line); the harpsichord takes care of the two canonic voices. Obviously, given the rules in effect here (and another meaning of the word *canon* is “rule or law”), the top and bottom parts have to be played twice to accommodate one entire traversal of the middle part.



Canon a 2 per tonos (2-part canon through the keys). Here Bach's inscription reads *Ascendenteque Modulatione ascendat Gloria Regis* ("And as the modulation rises, so may the King's Glory"). Bach writes an ornamented version of the RT (here played by the violin); beneath it the harpsichord plays two voices, the second of which repeats the first, four beats later and a fifth higher. Bach manipulates the ending of each part to modulate upward one step—thereby cycling through six different keys (*per tonos*) before returning to the original one, now one octave higher. The effect is dramatic, partly because Bach makes it sound so natural that you're hardly aware of what's happening.



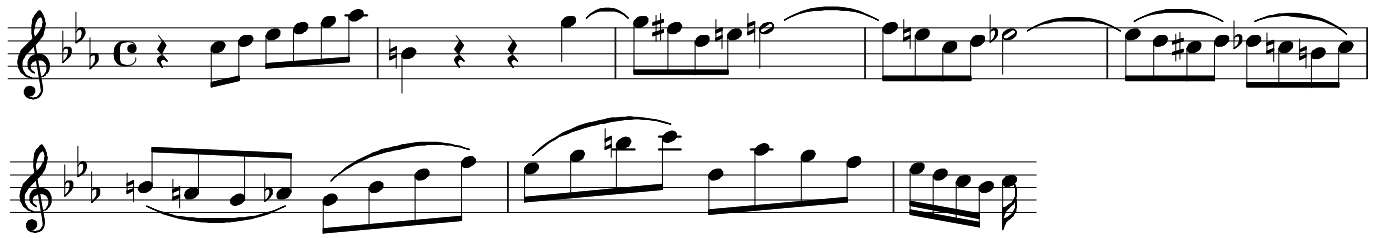
Fuga canonica in epidiapente (Canonic fugue at the fifth). The second of the Group A canons, this one places the RT over a busy bass line (cello) for ten measures, when the flute begins the RT a fifth higher (*in epidiapente*). Bach is able to sustain this for 78 measures, leading us through episodes and modulations while maintaining near-perfect imitation between the two upper voices.

Ricercar a 6 (6-part Ricercar). Notated in open score (one staff for each voice) in the engraved edition, this also exists in a keyboard version in Bach's own handwriting—the only portion of the MO to survive in autograph. A long and enormously intricate display of contrapuntal virtuosity, it is identified by one writer as a "six-voice fugue of almost inhuman clarity" and by another as "one of the best balanced and most exactly proportioned compositions ever conceived." In our performance the flute and violin play the top two voices and the cello the bottom; the harpsichord executes the remaining interior voices.

Two enigmatic canons. Bearing the inscription *Quaerendo invenietis* ("Seek and you shall find"), the 2-part canon has two clefs at its beginning, an alto clef and an upside-down bass clef. These suggest the solution lies in having this ornamented version of the RT repeat itself, upside-down and a seventh below its initial appearance. You'll hear two solutions, the first played on the harpsichord and the second, a mirror image of the first, played by harpsichord and cello.



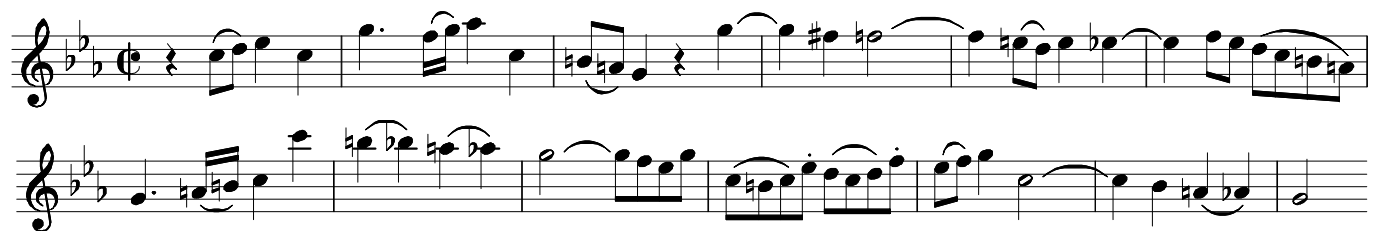
The second canon, for four voices, is open to several solutions, having to do not so much with when the voices enter as with where (*i.e.*, in what octave). Ours, with each instrument playing one voice, begins with the violin, followed by the flute, the harpsichord, and the cello. This is the busiest and most angular-sounding canon, and its subject is a radical variant of the RT:



Trio, Sonata sopr' il Soggetto Reale (Trio sonata on the Royal Theme). For most listeners this may be the most (or only) familiar part of the MO. It is the last and most ambitious of Bach's undertakings in this, the most common format for chamber music in the baroque era: two treble voices over a bass line harmonically reinforced by the harpsichord. Here, as he does in some passages of the *Ricercar a 3*, Bach incorporates elements of the newer *empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style), much in vogue amongst the musicians of Frederick's court. The RT is most apparent in the second movement (in the bass); an ornamented version, in triple meter, is the subject of the last movement:



Canon perpetuus (Perpetual canon). The last of the Group A canons, and the only portion of the MO aside from the trio sonata to specify instrumentation. This is a mirror canon: the second treble voice (violin) repeats the first, based on the RT, upside down and two measures later. At midpoint each voice recapitulates its first section, also upside down (in other words, the second half of the flute part is the same as the first half of the violin part). Thus the "mirror" casts reflections both vertically and horizontally. The bass line moves freely underneath, imitating the tune for one brief moment twenty-nine measures into the canon.



III. Rhetoric, and Esoteric Designs

A vast array of commentary has sprung up around the *Musical Offering*, augmented in recent decades by several theories proposing esoteric motivations and designs that extend far beyond the printed score. It could be argued that Bach was principally displaying his spectacular musical intellect for Frederick's amusement and edification. But students of Bach's output—especially of his late works, including the *B minor Mass*, the third and fourth installments of the *Clavierübung* (the third a collection of organ works, the fourth his Goldberg Variations for harpsichord), and *The Art of the Fugue*—have long been aware of larger organizational principles at work (for example, the astonishing symmetries and hierarchies of order in the *B minor Mass*). And we now know that Bach was an astute student of theology and rhetoric.

Like all baroque composers (to one degree or another), Bach subscribed to a theory of musical language that used certain codified gestures to heighten that language's effect. Dozens of 17th- and 18th-century treatises (especially prevalent in the German-speaking world) delineate a thorough-going and precise equivalency between musical speech and the spoken arts. The same doctrines of rhetoric that since antiquity had been part of the classical *quadrivium* were thought to govern many, if not all, aspects of musical composition.

Starting in 1980, Ursula Kirkendale, later joined by her husband and fellow musicologist Warren Kirkendale, proposed that the entirety of the *Musical Offering* (notably including the odd ordering of movements in the original print, observed in our performance today) can be understood as a precise allegory to a twelve-volume rhetorical manual, the *Institutio oratoria*, written by the Roman orator Quintilian about 92-95 A.D. This tome was admired by Frederick and also well-known both to Bach and his circle of colleagues in Leipzig. More recently the Canadian-born scholar Michael Marissen has written extensively on theological connotations in Bach's late instrumental works, including the MO. Along similar lines, the Hungarian scholar Zoltán Göncz has identified connections between subordinate motives in the *Ricercar a 6* and the Ten Commandments.

Such theorizing, abstruse as it may be, can be fascinating; it can also in some sense make the object at hand more distant and perhaps even less engaging. We want music to be expressive, not hard and shiny. But the *Musical Offering* is also expressive, especially in its inexorable *ricercars* and the trio sonata. And it possesses one other, deeply human, attribute: it's playful.

Douglas Hofstadter, the author of *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, populates his immense study with amazing feats of wordplay and sometimes daunting excursions into science, technology, art, music, strange loops, and artificial intelligence. He concludes with a clever and bizarre conversation among six characters called "Six-Part *Ricercar*," modeled on Bach's immense fugue. Before that he offers his final thoughts on the MO, referring to another author's observation that in its entirety it "is a *ricercar* in the original sense of the word." Hofstadter observes:

I think this is true; one cannot look deeply enough into the *Musical Offering*. There is always more after one thinks one knows everything. For instance, towards the very end of the *Six-Part Ricercar*, the one he declined to improvise, Bach slyly hid his own name, split between two of the upper voices. Things are going on on many levels in the *Musical Offering*. There are tricks with notes and letters; there are ingenious variations on the King's Theme; there are original kinds of canons; there are extraordinarily complex fugues; there is beauty and extreme depth of emotion; even an exultation in the many-leveledness of the work comes through. The *Musical Offering* is a fugue of fugues; a Tangled Hierarchy like those of Escher and Gödel, an intellectual construction which reminds me, in ways I cannot express, of the beautiful many-voiced fugue of the human mind.

The English conductor and scholar John Eliot Gardiner, in his *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, puts it another way: "Most of all we hear his [Bach's] joy and sense of delight in celebrating the wonders of the universe and the mysteries of existence—as well as in the thrill of his own creative athleticism." 270 years later, the MO continues to confound and delight us. (GH)