

THE STYLUS PHANTASTICUS IN THE PIANO WORKS OF C. PH. EMANUEL BACH AND W. A. MOZART*

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Any attempt to structure historical continuity into clear-cut epochs can create the illusion of a proportionally linear evolution. The danger of such categorization would be the neglect of the intricate intertwinings and confrontations of musical phenomena of the Post-Baroque and Pre-Classical era. Although apparently a paradox, the unity of this period resides in the diversity of its stylistic tendencies. Therefore, any attempt to group them into the same category would be doomed to failure from the very beginning. A more appropriate approach would be, instead, a triple stratification thereof, namely: features taken from the Baroque, newly interpreted features and entirely original features. It represents, in fact, an arc connecting the conquests of the Baroque, with the new tendencies of the Enlightenment and eventually finding its synthetic expression in the Viennese Classicism.

While aiming to define this arc between the Baroque and the Classical periods, we will limit our considerations to the language similarities shared by the fantasias for keyboard instruments by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, composed in their integrality during the same short period of approx. 11 years, i.e. between 1776 and 1787.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the key personality of the North German clavichord style, is the dominant figure in the stylistic evolution of the fantasia for keyboard instruments. He fully exploited the impulses of the free segments of the *Chromatic Fantasia in D minor* BWV 903 by Johann Sebastian Bach towards perfecting the fantasia, and thus created the free fantasia, deprived of its function as introduction or supplement of the different symbiotic

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forms. The importance that Emanuel Bach himself attaches to this creation can be inferred right from the relentless effort he put into spreading the 12 free fantasias, of which 11 appeared in individual editions, also thanks to Baron Gottfried van Swieten, and were distributed in Vienna, too. It is not surprising that musicologist Peter Rummenh oller, in his work entitled *Die musikalische Vorklassik*, calls Johann Sebastian's second son „the messenger of the past epoch towards the new one”⁸⁹.

The free fantasia has its origins in Baroque musical genres, such as: the prelude, toccata, capriccio, tombeau, cadenza, recitative which, under the name of *stylus phantasticus*, embody the improvisational conduct. Emanuel Bach's fantasias stand apart from this type of works composed by Frescobaldi, Froberger or Buxtehude, in that they already have an independent form, unconditioned by any function or purpose.

Noteworthy is the outstanding importance of the free fantasia in the late half of the 18th century, regarded, on the one hand, as one of the first manifestations of „absolute” instrumental music, free from any conceptual or verbal component – as clearly emphasized only by the German Classical and early Romantic music – and, on the other hand, as the most notable achievement in the process of liberation of the individual creative imagination from the rationalist systematic thinking of the beginning of the century. Likewise, an crucial role in the spread of this genre is attributed to the productive discussions and debates among the poets', philosophers' and musicians' circles in Hamburg and Berlin⁹⁰ about the fruitful influence that free fantasia had on the artistic ideal of the „Sturm und Drang” movement. Last, but not least, we should mention the intrinsic relationship between this „elitist” genre and the Baroque rhetorical tradition, through the rendition of affections and of the elements of musical discourse („redende Prinzip”).

We believe that the above is enough to understand why the free fantasias belong to those few works in which Emanuel Bach asserts his unlimited compositional freedom and creativity. While trying to eliminate, to a certain extent, the constraints of music notation and to escape from the conformism of the fixed musical form, he composes these works with no commercial intent, for the mere pleasure of a small group of cultivated musicians, motivated by his genuine interest in exploring his own ideational musical universe.

⁸⁹ Peter Rummenh oller, *Die musikalische Vorklassik. Kulturhistorische und musikgeschichtliche Grundrisse zur Musik im 18. Jahrhundert zwischen Barock und Klassik*, Bärenreiter Verlag, Kassel, 1983, p. 62: „Sendbot der alte Zeit an die neue”.

⁹⁰ Among whom Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim.

The free fantasia encompasses the most audacious of Bach's compositional techniques: metric freedom, elimination of bar-lines in most of the cases, abrupt changes of affection and unexpected turns of expressive characters, and last, but not least, diversity of form and dynamic and daring modulations. Through a mosaic of rapidly changing effects, E. Bach reaches his main objective: that of reaching deep down and touching the listener.

The degree to which this music meets the spirit of the times – i.e. the aesthetic ideal of the „Empfindsamkeit” style, whose emphasis on sensibility and on the irrational expressive tendencies heralds the Romantic musical aesthetics –, is evident from the opinions of Emanuel Bach's contemporaries, who repeatedly praise these improvised fantasias, calling them free outbursts of musical poetics, similar to the Shakespearean fantastic⁹¹. In his 1832 collection of musical articles *Für Freunde der Tonkunst*, Friedrich Rochlitz notes an anecdote about Mozart: he supposedly heard Emanuel Bach improvising on his Silbermann clavichord. With this impression in mind, Mozart says: „He is the father, we are the children. Those of us who do anything right, learned it from him. [...] We can no longer do as he did: but the way in which he did it places him beyond all others”⁹².

Mozart's biography offers a plethora of information on the practice of improvisation. The improvised fantasia was one of the attractions of Mozart's concerts, from his earliest childhood days to his famous academy concerts in Vienna, between 1774 and 1775, at the height of his career as a soloist. Although these fantasias were never written down, his piano pieces contain certain clues as to the musical physiognomy of these improvisations. Based on them and on some textual sources (letters, accounts by members of the Mozart family), a systematic classification has been adopted in the relevant literature of the different styles of improvisation of Mozart, as well as of the instrumental genres in which they occur. Besides the two categories of works in improvisatory style: themes with variations and cadenzas for piano concertos, there is a third category, including pieces conceived in the different forms of manifestation of the *stylus phantasticus* and influenced by the 18th century tradition of the improvisational technique and by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's free fantasia. The pieces belonging to this category are: *Modulating Prelude* KV⁶, *4 Preludes in C Major* KV 284^a identified with *Capriccio or Fantasia* KV 395 [300^g], *Prelude* from *Prelude and Fugue in C Major* KV 394 (383^a), *Fantasia-Fragment in D minor* KV 397 (385^g), *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475, and *Fantasia-Fragment for Violin and Piano in C minor* KV 396 (385^f) with its

⁹¹ In Carl Friedrich Cramer, *Magazin der Musik*, Hamburg, 1783/10.

⁹² Friedrich Rochlitz, *Karl Philipp Emanuel Bach*, in *Für Freunde der Tonkunst*, vol. IV, Leipzig 1832, p. 308: “Er ist der Vater; wir sind die Bub'n. Wer von uns 'was Rechtes kann, hat von ihm gelernt. [...] Mit dem, was er macht kämen wir jetzt nicht mehr aus: aber *wie* er's macht – da steht ihm Keiner gleich.”

adaptation for piano by Maximilian Stadler. The characteristic traits of these pieces emerge from the practice of improvisation. The reason of putting these musical ideas on paper was that of being able to repeat and study this performance, without ruining its primary improvisational nature.

In the *Modulating Prelude* KV⁶ and the 4 *Preludes in C Major* KV 284a, Mozart gets closest than ever to the language of E. Bach's fantasias. Mozart's intention was for the two pieces to serve his sister Nannerl as model of improvisation, in order to try the instrument. Like Bach's fantasias, the musical discourse is built on the bass line and on a pre-established harmonic framework. These contain a series of arpeggio figurations and passages that mark some very unusual harmonic progressions and are noted like Bach's fantasias, without any bar line. Such a liberty of tempo, meter and rhythm, along with the athematism of the works, assumes the clear rendition of the harmonic sequences and of the passage and arpeggio configurations.

Ex. 1a. W.A. Mozart, *Modulating Prelude* KV⁶

The image displays three systems of musical notation for W.A. Mozart's *Modulating Prelude* KV⁶. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. System 'a' shows a complex, flowing melodic line in the treble clef with a steady bass line. System 'b' features a treble clef line with trills and a bass clef line with sustained chords. System 'c' shows a treble clef line with intricate arpeggiated patterns and a bass clef line with a simple, rhythmic accompaniment.

Ex. 1b. Carl Ph. Emanuel Bach, *Fantasia in E flat Major* Wq 58/6 (H 277)⁹³

Bach states firmly that, in the improvised pieces, the performer should be free to create the boldest of modulations, which must be seen mainly as highly expressive moments. The chromatic and enharmonic modulations into the most distant keys are clearly meant to challenge the listener's expectations. Johann Nikolaus Forkel formulates the organic connection between harmony and expression as follows: „Passion modulation is best expressed through key modulation”⁹⁴.

The modulating chromatic passage, the external extension of the 4th theme of the *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475 by Mozart (Ex. 2a.) follows the writing of the modulating passages of Bach's free fantasias.

⁹³ From the 4th volume of the cycle *Clavier-Sonaten und freye Fantasien, nebst einigen Rondos fürs Fortepiano, für Kenner und Liebhaber* (1783).

⁹⁴ Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik*, Band I, Leipzig 1788, Einleitung § 14: „Die Modulation der Leidenschaft ist durch die Modulation der Töne am besten auszudrücken.”

Ex. 2a. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Fantezia în do minor* KV 475

Musical score for Ex. 2a, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Fantezia în do minor* KV 475. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system shows the beginning with a forte (*f*) dynamic and triplet markings. The second system features a complex melodic line with fingering numbers (1, 2, 4, 5) and a fermata. The third system continues the melodic development with more triplet markings and a final cadence.

Ex. 2b. Carl Ph. Emanuel Bach, *Fantasia in B flat Major* Wq 61/3 (H 289)⁹⁵

Musical score for Ex. 2b, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Fantasia in B flat Major* Wq 61/3 (H 289). The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system shows the beginning with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system features a complex melodic line with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The third system continues the melodic development with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking.

⁹⁵ From the 6th volume of the cycle *Clavier-Sonaten und freye Fantasien, nebst einigen Rondos fürs Fortepiano, für Kenner und Liebhaber* (1787).

A major influencing factor in the writing of Bach's fantasias were the operas he had been listening to for 27 years, at the Berlin Opera House. The dramatic tradition, along with the development of the recitative in operas, oratorios and cantatas, certainly have something in common with the more supple, refined and free attitude in this improvisational genre. Bach manages to create the theatrical atmosphere of the opera stages by alternating segments of arpeggio figurations with the rhetoric articulation of melodic lines and strong dynamic contrasts. In fact, the *recitativo* segments of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia* represent, in this respect, another source of inspiration.

Ex. 3a. Johann Sebastian Bach, *Chromatic Fantasia in D minor* BWV 903

Ex. 3b. Carl Ph. Emanuel Bach, *Fantasia in C Major* Wq 59/6 (H 284)⁹⁶

⁹⁶ From the 5th volume of the cycle *Clavier-Sonaten und freye Fantasien nebst einigen Rondos fürs Forte-Piano, für Kenner und Liebhaber* (1785).

The *Fantasia Fragment in C minor* KV 396 (385^f) by Mozart (Ex. 3c.) displays a strong affinity with this recitative style:

Ex. 3c. W. A. Mozart, *Fantasia Fragment in C minor* KV 396 (385^f)



Bach continuously simplifies the construction, harmony and writing of the free fantasias, being influenced by the structure of the sonata form, while the rich ornamentation is replaced by the simplicity and periodicity of the melodic line. In the last three fantasias of the cycle *für Kenner und Liebhaber*⁹⁷, we can actually speak of the notion of thematic construction. The continuous change of contrasting affections is achieved by alternating more or less constant thematic ideas with abrupt tempo changes, reaching up to 11 formal segments with contrasting characters. The formal level in *Fantasia in D minor* KV 397 and *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475 by Mozart contains astonishing coincidences with these structures, in that both the *Fantasia in D minor* and the *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475 are divided into 7 segments with different tempos and affective expressions, suggesting a spur-of-the-moment inspiration.

Regarding the expressive intentions, Mozart's and Bach's works contain numerous examples of similar instances of musical affections and rhetorical figures. The accompaniment motif in *Fantasia in D minor* KV 397, i.e. three eighth notes preceded by an eighth rest, is called „sigh figure” (*suspiratones*), while the resulting affection can be described as grave, or extremely sad:

⁹⁷ *Fantasia in C Major* Wq 59/6 (H 284), *Fantasia in B flat Major* Wq 61/3 (H 289) and *Fantasia in C Major* Wq 61/6 (H 291).

Ex. 4a. W. A. Mozart, *Fantasia in D minor* KV 397

Or another example from the final reprise of the *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475 by Mozart:

Ex 4b. W. A. Mozart, *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475

This motif also appears in Bach's last fantasia, i.e. *Fantasia in F sharp minor* Wq 67/H 300, that he himself entitled *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's Feelings* (1787) and which, due to the similarities between the expressive and affective components of the free fantasia and the 18th century *tombeau*, is considered a *Lamento* written for his own death. Starting from this consideration, musicologist Peter Schleuning identifies the *suspuration* figure with the „musical rhythm of a funeral procession”⁹⁸:

⁹⁸ Peter Schleuning, *Die freie Fantasie. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der klassischen Klaviermusik*, Verlag Alfred Kummerle, Göppingen, 1973, p., 282: „Trauerkondukt-Rhythmus”.

Ex. 4c Carl Ph. E: Bach, *Fantasia in F sharp minor* Wq 67/H 300,.



Regarding the motivic structure of the main theme's head of the *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475 (Ex. 5a.), Mozart could have been influenced by the themes of two pieces that the Baron van Swieten had brought to his knowledge: *Adagio* from *Concerto for Harpsichord* Wq 3 by Emanuel Bach (Ex. 5b.), and *Musikalischen Opfer* BWV 1079 by Johann Sebastian Bach (Ex. 5c.). The intervals used in the construction of the theme emphasize the specific affectation attributed to the C minor key according to the precepts of the time: that of sadness, despondency, misery.

Ex. 5a. W. A. Mozart, *Fantasia in C minor* KV 475



Ex. 5b. Carl Ph. E: Bach, *Concerto for Harpsichord* Wq 3



Ex. 5c. J. S. Bach, *Musikalischen Opfer* BWV 1079



These musical examples are conclusive with respect to the Baroque and Pre-Classical influences in Mozart's works, conceived in the different forms of manifestation of the *stylus phantasticus*. We also know that through the Baron van Swieten, Mozart became familiar not only with works by Johann Sebastian, Emanuel Bach or Händel, but also with the prominent

musical treaties of the latter half of the 18th century (E. Bach, Marpurg, Kirnberger, Forkel⁹⁹). It is therefore no surprise that the German musicologist Eberhard Preußner calls Mozart „the last composer to have mastered the entire language range of musical affections identified with the Baroque style”¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁹ C. Ph. E. Bach: *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (1753 and 1762), Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg: *Handbuch bei dem Generalbass und der Composition* (1755-1758), Johann Philipp Kirnberger: *Die Kunst der reinen Satzes* (1771-1779), Johann Nikolaus Forkel: *Musikalisch-kritische Bibliothek* (1778-1779).

¹⁰⁰ Quotation from Peter Cohen, *Theorie und Praxis der Clavierästhetik Carl Philipp Emanuel Bachs*, Verlag der Musikalien Karl Dieter Wagner, Hamburg, 1974, p. 17: „Mozart [...] der letzter die ganze Affektensprache des Barock beherrschte.”