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Sharri Hall—Best Expository

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Bach's Flute Music

Johann Sebastian Bach was a Baroque composer. He was an organ virtuoso, known for his keyboard compositions and contrapuntal works for instruments, keyboard, and voice. Bach established the context for music theory for several generations and is largely considered the pinnacle of Western tradition in music. Bach's music triumphed the end of the Baroque era, which music scholars credit for the development of tonality and tonal music.

Bach was a highly prolific composer. By his death in 1750, he had written several hundred compositions. Despite the scope of his collection, he composed fewer than ten of those pieces for the flute. Additionally, those few pieces are known to be exceedingly difficult to play on the modern concert flute in C. Some music scholars suggest that Bach's flute compositions are "unidiomatic and [show] no understanding of the qualities of the instrument." They argue that Bach neglected the tonalities and tessituras (range) of the instrument. As such, some scholars suggest that these pieces do not align with Bach's genius and were therefore composed by one of his students. Others suggest that since some of these pieces were definitely written by J.S. Bach, they suggest they may have been written for other instruments and later revised for flute. Other scholars, however, suggest that these difficulties exist because the pieces were written for a virtuoso, or especially talented performer beyond his/her years, that did not need to avoid certain difficulties. They may also suggest that these nuanced difficulties are better understood on a Baroque flute than on a modern flute. This essay does not seek to take a side; it aims to discuss and understand the difficulty and obscurity of Bach's writing for the transverse flute based on how Baroque style, the Baroque flute of Bach's time and his ultimate purposes in composing may have influenced his compositional choices.

The difficulty of Bach's flute compositions is better understood in the context of the style he was writing for. The Baroque era refers to the period of history between 1600 and 1750 typifying painting, architecture, and music as ornate, dramatic, and expressive. The Baroque style featured prominent bass and treble lines, and there was an uprising of melody and accompaniment style with basso continuo and figured bass (where the composer wrote a single bass line and left it to the performer to fill in the appropriate chords). The style features many diverse timbres in combination with the introduction of the concertato style (playing many instrumental voices against one another) and the concerto (a solo instrument set against an orchestra).

The Baroque era also derived "mean-tone" and "equal-tonality." These were tuning systems that offset the difficulty of tuning instruments of different timbres and preceded our modern system of tuning based on concert pitch a':440. This new system of tuning also

initiated chordal harmonies (triads based upon three notes that resonate together in the scale) and dissonance (purposeful unpleasing sound). This system of tuning led to the idea of tonality (music based around one key). The scalar systems of tonality allowed for chromaticism (using notes that do not belong in that key), counterpoint (point against point or note against note), and regular rhythmic patterns. Baroque music, particularly Bach's, highlighted the centrality of performance. It featured much ornamentation, alteration and improvisation, as well as cadenzas (extensions of pieces where the performer could highlight their virtuosic talent).

Bach undertook to highlight these characteristics in his compositions. He composed several sonatas (pieces for solo instrument and keyboard) for flute and keyboard that would combine the timbres of woodwind and plucked strings. More generally, he composed extensively in the fugal genres (settings of dense counterpoint where a subject is imitated through slight variations continually in all voices) and oratorios that featured full vocal chorus and a full orchestra. To target tonality, Bach only wrote in the keys that suited each instrument and only combined instruments that were well-suited for each other. For example, Bach rarely wrote for flute and violin because flutes were better suited to flat keys and violins were better suited to sharp keys. Most significantly, Bach was known for his impressive and excessive ornamentation. Turns and grace notes (notes added to leap into a heavy beat) are strewn throughout his music. Alteration was essentially required; it was understood amongst performers that it was appropriate to add ornamentation or even improvise as they saw fit. The flute severely limited Bach's compositional choices in that it could only play one note at a time. To counteract this limitation, Bach wrote virtuosic melodies and filled in the accompaniment with more contrapuntal styles. However, these pieces would be fundamentally more difficult to perform.

The difficulties in Bach's compositions for flute are also better understood in the context of the instrument he was writing for. The Baroque flute is an enigma in that it is quite different from the modern concert flute in C and that it existed in several different forms. Three of these were particularly notable.

The *flûte d'amour* was probably the most popular form of the instrument. It was a French flute with a lower range, having either a B or B-flat as its bottom pitch. It had a narrow bore which gave it an "atmospheric" sound and made it popular amongst Classical writers. The *bass dessus de la flûte traversière* was also a notable variant. It was a more refined version of the *flûte d'amour* and had a much wider bore. It existed in both French and English styles. The French style was wider at the foot with a large mouth hole and a "husky" sound, and the English style had the widest bore, but a beautiful sound. Lastly, there was the German/Dutch alto flute. The bore was considerably wider than that of the *flûte d'amour* but not as wide as the *bass dessus*. It had a conical bore and an undercut mouth hole that produced a sweet and expressive sound. There is debate about which specific flute Bach was writing for, but most settle on either the *flûte d'amour* or the German/Dutch alto flute.

The Baroque flute, unlike the modern flute which is tuned at concert pitch, was a transposing instrument (the music is notated at a pitch different from the pitch that

actually sounds). These instruments would have transposed either a major or minor third above the concert pitch in the keyboard. The concert flute (*haut dessus*) was the first to tune at concert pitch, beginning in 1730.

It is important to consider that during this era, it was not usual to make distinctions about which flute a performer was expected to play on. The flutist would have looked at a score written in a certain key and immediately known whether he or she was meant to transpose. For example, a flutist would have known that a piece written in B major would have been transposed down a major third to be read in G major.

Bach certainly knew it was wise to avoid keys with several sharps or flats, because the instrument only had one key, but many tone holes (holes in the body of the instrument to cut off air flow and direct pitch) that required forked or crossed fingerings to achieve many sharps or flats. Composers and flutists were to avoid these forked fingerings because they produced a substantial difference in tone quality. They were often “weaker” in sound and would impair the strength of the performance. As such, we must expect that Bach’s use of difficult keys were meant to be transposed into an easier key. Based on the keys in which they were written, the flute sonatas written between 1720 and 1730 were clearly written for the alto flute. If we follow these rules of transposition and apply them to the flute sonatas, we see that they have been written in keys such as G or D which feature only one and two sharps respectively.

Though Bach was a German composer, there was no predominantly German style of flute music. As such, it is understood that Bach wrote under the French theories and techniques for flute. Scholars believe that Bach may have taken his instruction for writing for the flute from *L’Art de Préluder* (1712) by Jacques Hotteterre. The manual gave detailed instructions on transposition and composition for the one-keyed flute.

Furthermore, due to imperfections in the making of the instruments, flutes often had ambiguous tonality. They would pitch at a slightly different note than others; if a flutist fingered a traditional D, a C-sharp may sound instead. As such, pieces for the flute were composed in ambiguous keys. Often, they were published in more than one key. The Hotteterre manual suggests several key pairings for flute and keyboard accompaniment. At the time, there existed a French clef that would make it possible for a keyboardist and flutist to read the same score and understand it in different keys. However, since no such clef existed in German music theory, Bach would have had to write separate scores for flute and keyboard to read in their own keys. This would have been tiresome and tedious. As such, German tradition sought, instead, to write the scores in the key necessary for the keyboardist and have the flutist transpose at sight.

Finally, the difficulty in Bach’s compositions for flute are better understood in the context of his purposes in writing for the flute. Some scholars suggest that Bach may have composed to engage in flute literature. Though the instrument was quickly becoming as popular and as important as the violin, there were few compositions readily available. Bach may have been composing to add to the literature.

Bach may have also composed on commission. There is conjecture that Bach may have been writing for Frederick the Great, King of Prussia. Frederick had been creating a

“music lab” where he was experimenting with many different types of instruments and trying to make improvements upon them. Frederick and Johann Quantz had been trying to make a concert flute in C. This flute would have been innovative, but wildly different from the traditional Baroque flute. Addington suggests that Bach, ever the conservative, may have composed these pieces to fit only with a bass dessus flute to convince the pair to forget their ties to this new concert flute. History suggests Bach may have been successful because the Quantz flute never became a popular model and was never used as a model for newer flutes.

Studying the difficulties in Bach’s compositions suggests that some of his works may have been commissioned by talented flutists and not amateurs; they may have been professionals who were constantly working on honing their talent. As such, Bach would have had the opportunity to write much more complex, dexterous, and virtuosic pieces. Accordingly, some scholars argue that Bach paid so much attention and detail to the flute because he was particularly fond of it. As such, he spent more time making these pieces more difficult to play.

Bach’s compositions for flute are generally understood as being particularly difficult compositions. Some scholars even suggest they were not composed by him or that they were not initially composed for the flute, but revised from compositions for other instruments. It is easier to understand the difficulty of Bach’s compositions in the context of the style they were being written in, the inherent complexities of the Baroque flute, and Bach’s purposes in composing for flute. With that in mind, Bach’s flute compositions can be understood more clearly and flutists can have a more informed opinion about the authenticity of the authorship.

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