PRECEDENTS TO J.S. BACH'S FUGUES FOR SOLO VIOLIN FROM THE SONATAS, BWV 1001, 1003, AND 1005

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ABSTRACT:

Johann Sebastian's fugues for unaccompanied violin from the Sonatas, BWV 1001, 1003, and 1005, play a central role in the violin repertoire. Bach's conceptualization of the fugues for solo violin, an instrument that would appear to preclude this sort of contrapuntal writing, is unique in the Baroque repertoire. This paper identifies precedents to Bach's creation of fugues for solo violin. While Bach's unprecedented and unmatched skill in the fugal genre provided for the creation of the violin fugues, he drew ideas from existing compositions and techniques. Specifically, he adopts the formal adaptation of the *sonata da chiesa* to the solo violin sonata which occurred in the Italian school of violin playing, notably Arcangelo Corelli. Furthermore, he builds upon early experimentation with the unaccompanied violin sonata and the development of virtuoso techniques within the German school of virtuoso violin playing of the late seventeenth century. Bach's fugues for solo violin, therefore, represent a synthesis of the Italian and German traditions of violin playing.

Johann Sebastian Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, BWV 1001-1006 form a hallmark in any violinist's repertoire. Within these six works, several movements emerge from the others because of the sheer compositional feats that they contain. Three such movements, the fugues from the Sonatas, BWV 1001, 1003, and 1005 are unique in their conception as three- or four-voice fugues on the violin, an instrument that by its very nature would seem to preclude such complex contrapuntal writing. These fugues remain unique within the violin repertoire; there are no other known fugues for unaccompanied violin in the standard repertoire by composers preceding Bach or by any composer for nearly two centuries after him. It is not until twentieth-century compositions like Eugène Ysaÿe's *Sonata No. 1 for Solo Violin,* Op. 27, No. 1 and Béla Bartók's *Sonata for Solo Violin*, bb. 124 that other fugues for unaccompanied violin emerge in the standard repertoire. Bach's writing continues to pose vast challenges to modern violinists.

Bach composed the sonatas and partitas in 1720 during his time in Cöthen.[1] During this period, Bach published the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in 1722 at age 37. This volume consists of twenty-four sets of preludes and fugues-- one set per key. Perhaps the most striking element of the fugues is the variety of ideas incorporated in different fugues. They range from two to five voices, employ subjects of different lengths, and vary in their use of elements from the antiquated canzone to more modern idioms.[2] Similarly, the three fugues for unaccompanied violin utilize diverse characteristics. Perhaps the most striking divergence of the violin fugues from the keyboard fugues is the sheer length of violin fugues. Joel Lester notes that the G-minor Fugue (BWV 1001), the shortest of the violin fugues, is nearly three times as

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[1] Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work*, trans. John Hargraves (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), 109.
[2] Joel Lester, *Bach's Works for Solo Violin: Style, Structure, Performance*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.

long as the keyboard fugues of commensurate tempos from Book 1 of the *Well Tempered Clavier*.[3] The sheer magnitude of these works on an instrument confined to four strings demands an investigation of the origins of these works. Johann Sebastian Bach's conception of the fugues for unaccompanied violin from his Sonatas BWV 1001, 1003, and 1005 represents both the application of the *sonata da chiesa* to the solo violin sonata within the Italian school of violin playing and experimentation with the unaccompanied violin sonata within the German school of virtuoso violin playing of the later seventeenth century.

Italian Precedent

The application of the *sonata da chiesa* structure to the Italian solo violin sonata influenced Bach to adopt this structure in his Sonatas, BWV 1001, 1003, and 1005. Specifically, Corelli's *Sonate a violino e violine o cimbalo*, Op. 5, No. 1-6 (the "free sonatas") utilize the *sonata da chiesa* structure. Most importantly, within these six sonatas, nine fugal movements emerge. Corelli's conception of the *sonata da chiesa* within the free sonatas, however, differs from Bach's structure by the use of an additional fast movement. The Corelli sonatas, like the Bach sonatas, use the overall format of a slow introduction, fugal allegro, a slow movement, and another fast movement—either a fugue or a dance. However, in each of the Corelli sonatas, an additional allegro, a moto perpetuo, appears either immediately preceding or immediately following the second slow movement.[4] Furthermore, the final movements of each of the Bach sonatas in question are neither fugues nor dances. Rather, they are moto perpetuos, bearing more resemblance to Corelli's additional allegro movements than to Corelli's finales. However,

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[3] Lester, 58.

[4] Peter Allsop, *Arcangelo Corelli: New Orpheus of our Times*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130.

despite the small differences in structure, Corelli's first six solo sonatas serve as the most clear structural precedent to the Bach sonatas within the violin sonata medium. Henry Joachim argues that this development of the sonata form should be regarded as Corelli's most significant legacy within the compositions of his successors.[5]

The fugues from Corelli's *Sonate a violino e violine o cimbalo*, represent Corelli's efforts to adapt the fugal movements from his trio sonatas for the duo medium.[6] Composed in 1700, the fugues from the solo sonatas represent over two decades of manipulation of the fugue within the trio sonata medium. Corelli's fugal style derives from the Bolognese fugal idiom of Cazzati and Vitali.[7] However Corelli expanded the length and scope of his fugues. By 1689, the fugues from his trio sonatas, Op. 3, began to utilize shorter, more open-ended subjects. Moreover, the first violin introduction of the subject, was no longer unaccompanied by the continuo. He also achieved more clarity of structure through the use of multiple counter-expositions in many instances.[8] These new developments in Corelli's fugal idiom are clearly paralleled in the solo sonatas where the solo violin assumes the role of both of the violins in the trio sonatas, necessarily requiring polyphony.

Corelli's solo sonatas, Op. 5, No. 1-6 represent a marked departure from earlier works for solo violin and continuo. In particular, the fugal movements are revolutionary in their own right. In a search for precedents to these fugues, very few clear predecessors emerge. In the Italian violin repertoire between 1630 and the 1680s, composers impose comparatively few technical demands on players, at least in comparison to the compositions before 1630 and to the

[5] Henry Joachim, "Three Milestones in the History of Violin Playing: I. Corelli," *The Musical Times* 73, no. 1076 (1932): 889.
[6] Allsop, 130.
[7] Ibid., 84.
[8] Ibid., 97.

compositions of the German school. Furthermore, the few instances of extant solo violin sonatas are works that are technically simple, rarely venturing from first position and avoiding polyphony altogether. Peter Allsop compiles a list of the surviving solo sonatas from the Italian repertoire. These works include sets of sonatas by M. Uccellini (1649), G.A. Leoni (1652), A. Berardi (1670), P. Deglii Antonii (1676 and 1686), and G. B. Viviani (1678).[9] Allsop argues that the absence of polyphony in these works is merely an indication of the absence of the printing technology. The Italian reliance on the movable type until 1700 ruled out the printing of double stops and chordal writing.[10] Nevertheless, some of these sonatas show some tendencies towards imitative writing, though the violin parts remain monophonic. For example, Leoni utilizes the name 'canzone' on the inner sections of sonatas 1, 30, and 32. The imitative techniques within Leoni's sonatas are limited to motivic relations between sections and contrapuntal entrances.[11] Hence, the imitative writing by Leoni does not approach the complexities of Corelli's fugal movements. However, this use of the canzone indicates a move, albeit primitive, towards imitative techniques, which serves as a clear predecessor of the fugue. Outside of the solo sonata medium, however, several pieces that predate Corelli's Op. 5 utilize imitative double-stopping techniques. These precedents include Torelli's *Concertino per camera a violino e violoncello*, Op. 4 (1687), a set of polyphonic dance music with imitative elements, and the second movement of Clemente Bernardi Rozzi's *Sonata No. 7* (1680s).[12] The contrapuntal elaboration in Corelli's fugues from the solo sonatas, however, vastly surpasses any of its known predecessors. Corelli effectively synthesized the chordal writing of composers such as Torelli

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[9] Allsop, 122.
[10] Ibid., 124.
[11] Eleanor McCrickard, "The Roman Repertory for Violin before the time of Corelli," *Early Music* 18, No. 4 (1990): 565.
[12] Allsop, 124.

and Rozzi with the tendency towards imitative writing in the solo sonatas of the later seventeenth-century Italian violin school.

Corelli's solo sonatas, Op. 5 represent some of the most popular repertoire of the eighteenth century. Between the original publication of these sonatas in 1700 and 1800, some fifty editions of these works were published.[13] There can be no doubt that Johann Sebastian had ready access to them. These works crossed national boundaries within the first decade of the eighteenth-century. The influence of Corelli's Op. 5 in Bach's *Sonatas for Solo Violin* is evident in the adoption of the *sonate da chiesa* form.

German Precedent

The virtuoso writing and technical developments of the German violin school of the seventeenth century created the techniques necessary to execute the Bach fugues for unaccompanied violin. Thomas Dresher argues that this rise in virtuoso writing was central to the importance placed on the virtuosic soloist at the court. The technical challenges, improvisatory practices, and programmatic elements associated with the compositions of Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, Johann Jakob Walther, and Johann Paul von Westhoff represent efforts to stimulate interaction between the courtly audience and the violin virtuoso.[14] It is within this context, therefore, that Biber, J.J. Walther, and Westhoff developed the techniques necessary to execute chordal writing on the violin.

In order to play complex polyphonic passages, Biber and Walther developed several novel bowing techniques. Most notably, *ondeggiando* and *bariolage* involve playing a passage

[13] Allsop, 120.

[14] Thomas Drescher, "'Virtuosissima conversazion': Konstituenten des solistischen Violinspiels gegen Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis,* XX (1996): 41.

alternately on two strings to bring out the separate colors or voices of what are generally two distinct lines (or one moving line and one static line). *Ondeggiando* alternates strings under a slur whereas *bariolage* usually indicates separate bows for each note.[15] Within the context of the Bach fugues (as well as in the Chaconne from the D-minor Partita, BWV 1004), performers utilize these techniques both where indicated by Bach and to their own taste in chordal sections. For example, one instance of an *ondeggiando*-like technique occurs in the A-minor Fugue, BWV 1003, in measure 46 and all commensurate measures where the moving line alternates with an open string (either an open A or, later, an open E). Bach utilizes *bariolage* in the C-major Fugue, BWV 1005, from measures 186 to 200 and again from measures 273-287. Furthermore, performers often use one of these techniques to their own taste in passages such as measures 38-41 of the G-minor Fugue, BWV 1001. These practices serve to break up the texture of constant chords necessary to fulfill the contrapuntal requirements of the fugue. Furthermore, Bach utilizes a bow stroke similar to Walther's *arpeggiando* technique. Like Walther, Bach writes rapid arpeggios in order to avoid a constant texture of chords. Bach utilizes this type of technique in passages such as measures 42-51 of the G-minor Fugue. Though Bach's arpeggios are sixteenth notes (or eighth notes in the C-major Fugue), the smallest non-ornamental division of the beat within the fugues, they pale in comparison to the speed and dexterity at which Walther envisioned the execution of similar passages in his compositions. It is precisely this dexterity and nuanced bow stroke, however, which enabled Bach to write fugues for violin. These techniques allowed Bach to break up an otherwise constantly-chordal texture in a manner similar to the techniques that he used in the keyboard fugues.

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[15] David D. Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music*, (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1965), 265-266.

Walther and Biber similarly developed the capabilities for chords and double stops within the violinist's left hand. The works of both composers exploit the polyphonic capabilities of the violin to their fullest. The fundamental technical divergence between Walther and Biber relates to the use of scordatura; Biber used it consistently while Walther rejected this approach.[16] Biber's heavy use of this technique indicates his fascination with the use of multiple stops. Walther similarly used multiple stops frequently, but always within the standard violin tuning. Bach's unaccompanied sonatas for violin do not use scordatura technique. This absence of scordatura represents a tacit acknowledgement of the chordal capabilities and limitations of the violin in its standard tuning. Bach voices each sonata in a key (G-minor, A-minor, and C-major) that is conducive to chordal writing on a violin. Within each of these keys, all of the strings are open within the diatonic scale, allowing for much more flexible writing of three- and four-note chords.

The virtuosic German school of violin playing gave rise to a few early works for unaccompanied violin. This *sonata senza basso* was exceedingly rare in late seventeenth-century violin music; however, the German violin virtuosos were among the first to compose in this genre. Notably, Biber's final work, *Passacaglia*, was composed for solo violin and utilizes sixty-five repetitions of the descending Passacaglia bass.[17] A clear forbearer to the Bach Chaconne, this work derives its significance from the scope and length of the writing for unaccompanied violin. Bach's fugues for solo violin range from six to twelve minutes in duration and are substantial works unto themselves. Biber's *Passacaglia* represents a precedent to the sheer amount of material presented in the Bach fugues.

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[16] Boyden, 226.

[17] Robin Stowell, *The Early Violin and Viola: A Practical Guide*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

However, Johann Paul von Westhoff's *Six Suites for Violin Solo* appear to be the clearest forbear to the Bach Sonatas and Partitas. Composed in 1696, Westhoff's suites take the form of dance suites. They, therefore, are clearly the precedent to Bach's *Partitas*, BWV 1002, 1004, and 1006. Each sonata is four movements long and assumes the same standardized order: allemande, corrente, sarabande, giga. These works are heavily polyphonic. Whereas Bach's polyphonic writing in the fugues is generally chordal, Weshoff's suites utilize double stops more often than chords. There are some instances of imitative polyphony, especially within the gigas. However Westhoff strives to make each suite as virtuosic as possible. He succeeds in this endeavor. The polyphonic passages in the suite pose more technical difficulties than the Bach Sonatas and Partitas. Westhoff was a "puritanical proponent" of the suite form, eschewing the programmatic influences that fascinated his predecessors Biber and Walther.[18] Bach's Sonatas and Partitas are similarly non-programmatic music.

Westhoff was the only surviving member of the seventeenth-century German violin school to meet Johann Sebastian Bach. They likely met in Weimer in 1703, two years before Westhoff's death, at which time Westhoff surely introduced his suites for solo violin to Bach.[19] This meeting clearly influenced the eighteen-year-old Bach and likely altered his approach to violin composition, laying the framework for the *Sonatas and Partitas*. Simon McVeigh argues that the legacy of Walther, Biber, and Westhoff is solely reflected in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.[20]

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[18] John Paul von Westhoff, *Six Suites Pour Violon Seul Sans Basse*, ed. Péter P. Várnai, (New York, NY: Amadeus Verlag, 1975), 2.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Simon McVeigh, "The Violinists of the Baroque and Classical Periods," In *The Cambridge Companion to the Violin*, ed. Robin Stowell, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48.

Conclusion

The presence of a historical precedent to the Bach fugues for solo violin does not diminish the monumental originality of these works. Nor does it cast shadow on the vast compositional achievements portrayed in these movements. These fugues reflect a synthesis of Corelli's structural contributions to the solo violin sonata, the German virtuosos' development of polyphonic techniques on the violin, and the experimentation with unaccompanied repertoire for violin within the German school. However, Bach fused these developments with his idiomatic writing of keyboard fugues. More important, perhaps, is the diversity displayed between the fugues.[21] The differences between these three movements indicate Bach's complete mastery of the genre of fugal writing and his technical mastery of the violin.

The fugues differ significantly from their predecessors. Bach's fugues are much longer and more structurally complex than the Corelli fugues. Furthermore, the voicing of all three parts on a violin as opposed to a violin and continuo instrument limits the range in which statements can be voiced. This limitation necessitated more creative voicing in the Bach fugues. The development of polyphonic techniques within the German school laid the framework for this creative voicing. The comparative ease of Bach's chordal writing to the polyphonic writing of the German virtuosos is indicative of the extent to which Biber, J.J. Walther, and Westhoff developed these techniques. Despite these divergences from precedent, Bach's fugues clearly represent an evolution from the innovations of earlier violinists.

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[21] Lester, 57.

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