

THE FLUTE AND OBLIGATO KEYBOARD SONATAS
OF CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH:
TWO IN PLACE OF THREE

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by

Beth Ellen Chandler
1703F South Dogwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
(540) 574-3772
chand2be@jmu.edu

B.M., Baylor University, 1993

M.M., New England Conservatory, 1996

Project Advisor: _____
bruce d. mcclung, Ph.D.

The flute works of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach are numerous, varied, and encompass almost his entire compositional career, yet they comprise a small portion of his extensive oeuvre. In addition to many chamber works, Bach's flute compositions include four concerti, eleven sonatas with continuo, one solo sonata, and six obbligato keyboard sonatas. Bach categorized the eighteen sonatas into two groups: *solī* and *trīi*, in reference to the number of parts that are equal in importance; hence the distinction between accompaniment and keyboard styles.¹ The *trīi* category refers to the six flute and obbligato keyboard sonatas, which were composed during Bach's tenure at the court of Frederick the Great in Potsdam and Berlin (1738–1768).² These sonatas date between 1747 and 1766, the first five while at Potsdam, the sixth in Berlin. There is much speculation as to the impetus for these works, since relations between Bach and his royal employer were, at best, strained. Five of the six (all but the Sonata in C Major, H. 515 (W. 87)) are adaptations of trio sonatas for various combinations of flutes, violins, and basso continuo. This sporadic interest in composing for the flute may be indicative of Bach's efforts to please his employer, or conversely, merely a recycling of compositions so as to exert as little effort as possible on what he suspected would be futile efforts to gain the king's approval.

The obbligato sonatas raise numerous questions about performance, style, and merit. Although many of Bach's works are considered part of the standard flute

¹ Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Verzeichnis des musikalischen Nachlasses des verstorbenen Capellmeisters Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (The Catalog of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's Estate: A Facsimile of the Edition by Schneibes, Hamburg, 1790)*, annotated with a preface by Rachel W. Wade (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), cited in Leta Miller, "C. P. E. Bach's Sonatas for Solo Flute," *The Journal of Musicology* 11 (1993): 205.

repertoire, many performers and teachers regard the obbligato sonatas as unworthy of study because of the complexities in structure, style, ornamentation, and general listener appeal. The irregular phrase structures, surprising and unconventional harmonic shifts, unusually varied rhythmic figures, and other features of the North German *empfindsamer Stil* appear at first hearing to make little sense to the ear. The eighteenth-century flute repertoire features works by most major composers of the Baroque and Classical styles, in addition to a number of works by lesser-known composers. Modern audiences are accustomed to the rich, contrapuntal textures of the late Baroque, as well as the light, balanced music in the Classical style. But it is Bach's idiomatic and transitional style that remains unfamiliar to the contemporary ear. Bach's obbligato sonatas should be an essential part of the flute literature and are worthy of study and performance.

One facet of these sonatas is the element of transcription. In most cases Bach shifted one of the treble voices of the trio sonata to the right hand of the keyboard part in the corresponding obbligato sonata. Although the timbre has been changed from the original, the musical integrity of the work remains intact. These sonatas are still, in essence, trio sonatas, with only two players involved. Because the obbligato sonatas are for two players, flutists tend to approach them with the same process as they employ for solo sonatas, such as those by Telemann, Handel, or even Johann Sebastian Bach. Because most of C. P. E. Bach's obbligato sonatas were conceived originally as trio sonatas and little has been lost in the original musical texture and character through transcription, the flutist's approach of assuming he or she is the *solo* instrument is

² Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Sonatas in D Major, H. 505 (W. 83); B-flat Major, H. 578 (W. 161/2); E Major, H. 506 (W. 84); G Major, H. 508 (W. 85); G Major, H. 509 (W. 86); and C Major, H. 515 (W. 87).

inappropriate. The obbligato sonatas feature both solo parts interacting at times in opposition, at times in alternation of roles as soloist and accompanist, and at other times in a unified manner. There is little resemblance between these works and the typical eighteenth-century solo sonata. These sonatas truly are hybrids—trio sonatas masquerading as solo sonatas. The performance experience in playing the obbligato sonatas is different from the trio sonata chamber music experience, yet one must approach them in a similar fashion if the performance is to be convincing.

I propose to demonstrate how the obbligato sonatas are, in reality, trio sonatas for two instruments, and how a performer should approach them in study and rehearsal to obtain an intelligible performance. Through performance of several examples taken from the trio sonatas, with the assistance of another flutist or violinist, I will demonstrate how these sonatas were originally conceived. I will discuss a variety of rehearsal techniques that will develop the solo performer's understanding of the subtle coloration effects that are critical to Bach's musical style, such as rehearsing from a full score and exchanging parts with the other performers. I will also discuss the normative eighteenth-century sonata and how the obbligato sonatas digress from this standard, focusing on comparisons between the appropriate approaches to a continuo sonata versus the fuller trio sonata. I will conclude with the performance of two complete obbligato sonatas: the Sonata in B-flat Major, H. 578 (W. 161/2) and the Sonata in E Major, H. 506 (W. 84).

There has been much written on Bach, but relatively little that concerns the flute repertoire. James L. Grine's D.M.A. thesis has been useful in my preliminary research,

particularly because he discusses these works from a performer's perspective.³ However, Grine's analysis is rather cursory and deals almost exclusively with how to illuminate the flute part with less regard for the obbligato part, and therefore, the whole of the work. Although Grine does mention that the obbligato sonatas are arrangements of the earlier trio sonata versions, he does not address how familiarity with both formats could render a more enlightened performance for both the performer and listener, nor does he clarify the obbligato sonatas' musical correlation to their trio sonata counterparts.⁴ My approach to the problem of rehearsal and performance of Bach's obbligato sonatas takes a fundamentally different approach than that of Grine. Leta Miller's article "C.P.E. Bach's Sonatas for Solo Flute" provides excellent, comprehensive historical information about the sonatas, as well as analysis of Bach's compositional development through the flute works.⁵ She also refers to the historical trend in the late eighteenth century of composers adapting existing trio sonatas to impart "an increasingly prominent role for the keyboard."⁶ However, Miller omits any discussion of performance issues. There are also several other theses and dissertations relevant to this topic, yet which do not focus solely on Bach's compositional style, such as Charlotte Ann Kolczynski's "The Eighteenth-Century Transverse Flute: Literature, Structure and Performances Practices," Mary A. Oleskiewicz's "Quantz and the Flute at Dresden: His Instruments, his Repertory and

³ James Laurence Grine, "The Flute and Obbligato Keyboard Sonatas by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: A Study for Performance" (D.M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1987).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20–24.

⁵ Leta Miller, "C.P.E. Bach's Sonatas for Solo Flute," *The Journal of Musicology* 11 (1993): 203–49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

their Significance for the ‘Versuch’ and the Bach Circle,” and Darrin Frederick Thaves’s “Frederick the Great: His Influence on the Output of Flute Sonatas by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.”⁷ With specific attention to study and rehearsal techniques utilizing their trio sonata predecessors, I aim to present an informed performance of the obbligato sonatas as illuminated by their historical significance and context as trio sonatas for two performers.

My methodology will consist of a comparison of selected original trio sonatas to the obbligato sonatas, including differences in texture, register, and timbre. I will explore ways in which a flutist might approach these pieces as true chamber pieces, with both the flute and keyboard right hand parts playing equal roles. Through performance of excerpts of movements of the original trio versions, I plan to demonstrate aurally how the three voices (two treble lines consisting of two flutes, or a flute and violin, and keyboard) interplay, and how Bach’s own transcription and reduction to two instruments playing three voices can be effective, provided the flutist realizes how the parts rely upon one another for musical coherence. I also plan to highlight occurrences in these works where Bach has made intentional changes in the transcriptions for a more dramatic musical effect. For example, the final movement of the E-major trio sonata for two flutes and keyboard, H. 580 (W. 162) (the precursor of the obbligato sonata in E major, H. 506 (W. 84)), concludes in a manner that foreshadows Haydn’s “Farewell Symphony,” since Bach

⁷ Charlotte Ann Kolczynski, “The Eighteenth-Century Transverse Flute: Literature, Structure and Performances Practices” (M.M. thesis, State U. College, Potsdam, N.Y., 1977); Mary A. Oleskiewicz, “Quantz and the Flute at Dresden: His Instruments, his Repertory and their Significance for the ‘Versuch’ and the Bach Circle” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1998); and Darrin Frederick Thaves, “Frederick the Great: His Influence on the Output of Flute Sonatas by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach” (M.M. thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 1999).

leaves the flute to finish the piece alone.⁸ An adaptation of the second flute part to the right hand of the keyboard is typical of many of Bach's adaptations, but doing so in this case would cause the final word of the sonata to be uttered from the keyboard, which would not warrant the same effect as from the flute. Other examples of Bach's adaptive compositional choices will be illustrated.

A topic pertaining to eighteenth-century repertoire, such as Bach's obligato sonatas, presents numerous performance issues for modern instruments. Unfortunately, the scope of this lecture-recital will not allow me to address specific issues of improvised ornamentation. Nor will I investigate the doubtful attribution of any flute works that have been attributed to J. S. Bach, but are suspected to be the work of his most famous son (such as the sonatas in C major, BWV 1033, E-flat, BWV 1031, and G minor, BWV 1020). I will also not include an extensive discussion of the differences between the baroque flute and modern flute, beyond a brief mention of the instruments for which the Bach obligato sonatas were composed and how an eighteenth-century performer might approach these works differently than a modern performer.

The six flute and obligato keyboard sonatas of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach are important contributions to the eighteenth-century flute repertoire. Although many flutists steer away from programming these works in favor of works by more familiar composers, Bach's works are worthy of study and performance. The genre of the eighteenth-century trio sonata, especially Bach's precursors to the obligato sonatas, as well as a knowledge of the late Baroque solo sonata, are crucial to understanding his works. An informed performance of Bach's obligato sonatas will be communicated to

⁸ Miller, "C.P.E. Bach's Sonatas for Solo Flute," 227.

the audience, who, rather than being dissatisfied by unfamiliar *empfindsamer Stil*, will come to hear these works with greater understanding.

TENTATIVE OUTLINE

- I. C. P. E. Bach: An introduction to style and genres 4 min.
 - A. Overview of oeuvre, influences, employment
 - B. Works for flute
 - 1. Concerti, continuo sonatas
 - 2. Trio sonatas and obligato sonatas
 - II. Function of obligato sonatas as hybrid genre in flute repertoire 8 min.
 - A. Misunderstood by performers
 - 1. Difficulty in style, phrasing, ornamentation
 - 2. Unique amongst eighteenth-century repertoire
 - 3. Approached as standard solo sonata
 - B. Transcription of trio sonatas
 - 1. Bach's method of adaptation
 - 2. Performance of excerpts to demonstrate adaptation to obligato sonata version
 - III. Performance suggestions for obligato sonatas through study of trio sonata predecessors 17 min.
 - A. *Empfindsamer Stil* and appropriate musical elements to emphasize
 - B. Rehearsing from full score and exchanging parts with other performers
- TOTAL LECTURE AND EXAMPLES: 29 min.
- IV. Performance of selected obligato sonatas
 - A. Sonata in B-flat Major, H. 578 (W. 161/2) 18 min.
 - B. Sonata in E Major, H. 506 (W. 84) 13 min.

TOTAL PERFORMANCE: 31 min.

TOTAL TIME: 60 min.

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