

Derek Remeš<sup>\*1</sup><sup>\*</sup> *Eastman School of Music, USA*<sup>1</sup> *derekremes@gmail.com*

## J. S. Bach's Chorales: Reconstructing Eighteenth-Century German Figured-Bass Pedagogy in Light of a New Source

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

If we wish to claim a connection to Bach in our own pedagogy, we must first determine in greater detail what Bach's methods actually were. This requires that we make inferences from his students' writings, since Bach himself left few sources related to pedagogy. Fortunately, new manuscripts from Bach's circle of pupils have recently come to light, promising further clues (McCormick 2015). Among these new sources is the *Sibley Choralbuch*, rediscovered and assessed anew by Robin A. Leaver (2016). The anonymous manuscript, held at Sibley Library at the Eastman School of Music (Rochester, New York), likely originates from Bach's students in Dresden from about 1740. As Leaver has argued, the *Sibley Choralbuch* suggests that there were two separate Bach chorale traditions: the first is the well-known vocal tradition based on chorales from Bach's cantatas and passions; the second tradition, evidenced by sources from Bach's students, is not vocal, but keyboard-based (Leaver 2001). Because this second, keyboard tradition was often improvised, there remains less evidence of its existence. The *Sibley Choralbuch*, examined here for the first time in a theoretical context, is therefore significant because it sheds light on this lesser-known, keyboard-based tradition. While the *Sibley Choralbuch* provided the impetus for Leaver's claim that there were two separate Bach chorale traditions, I will draw on a variety of eighteenth-century German sources to substantiate and develop Leaver's hypothesis — I argue that Bach's chorale-based pedagogy intended to bridge from the keyboard style to the vocal style.

The keyboard style tends to be more triadic, consonant, disjunct, homophonic, diatonic, and vertically oriented; moreover, it was often improvised in the context of organ accompaniment for congregational singing, where only the chorale was sung. In contrast, the vocal style generally uses more dissonant figures, more suspensions, is more conjunct, has faster note values, is more chromatic, and horizontally oriented; in addition, the vocal style was less often improvised and instead written out for concerted music, where each of the four voices were sung. After mastering both styles, Bach's students would attempt non-chorale-based, or 'free' composition, meaning fugue. There exists, then, a division in Bach's pedagogy between figured-bass chorales used to teach harmony, and fugue used to teach counterpoint. Bach's ordering of subjects implies that he viewed an understanding of harmony as a prerequisite to counterpoint study. And since Bach was training composers, it seems likely that his pedagogical

method reflects his own compositional outlook. This idea that figured-bass harmony was foundational to Bach's contrapuntal thinking has important implications for our understanding of his music. Therefore, the goal of my paper is to determine how Bach *taught* harmony, because this may illuminate how he *understood* harmony. Ultimately, I hope this leads to a re-consideration of the role chorales play in our own pedagogy.

C. P. E. Bach's description of his father's pedagogy is my point of departure: after teaching the basics of thoroughbass, Bach introduced chorales in two stages (Wolff 1998, 399). In Stage 1, the student receives a chorale in the highest voice, plus a bassline and figures — the student's task is to supply inner voices and ornamentation. Thus, Stage 1 focuses on texture, since the outer voices and harmony are given. Sources relating to Stage 1 have single basses, like the *Sibley Choralbuch*, which likely stems from Bach's students in Dresden. Since no relevant sources survive from the Dresden students, I will turn to musicians outside the Bach circle to help illuminate Stage 1. These musicians are Michael J. F. Wiedeburg (1720–1800), Justin Heinrich Knecht (1752–1817), and Johann Gottlob Werner (1777–1822). In Stage 2, only the chorale is given — the student's task is to compose increasingly complex basslines and inner voices. Thus, Stage 2 focuses on simple two-voice counterpoint and harmony. Sources relating to this stage have multiple basslines for each chorale. The writings of Bach's students Johann Christian Kittel (1732–1809) and Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721–1783), as well as some musicians outside the Bach circle, will help illuminate this second stage.

I categorize Knecht, Werner, and Wiedeburg's descriptions of various strategies for ornamenting chorale accompaniments into five types. These types deal with texture and therefore relate indirectly to Stage 1 in Bach's method. Type 1 is the close style (today's 'keyboard style'). Type 2 is the spread style (today's 'chorale style'). Type 3 begins to add ornamentation, first to bass, then the lower voices, then to all voices, including the chorale melody. Type 4 is the 'Full-voiced Style', where the player supplies as many notes as possible between the outer voices; as long as the outer voices move in good counterpoint, parallel and direct motion with the middle voices is tolerated. Thus, the 'Full-voiced Style' affords organists and harpsichordists a degree of dynamic control by varying the number of voices. Type 5 is the unison style.

Stage 2a in Bach's method is the composition of new basslines to a given chorale. Kirnberger describes four harmonic types, which I label A, B, C, and D. Type A allows for triads in any inversion from scale degrees one, four, and five, with the possibility of the dominant chord having a seventh; type B includes inverted triads on all diatonic degrees; type C

has inverted triads from degrees one, four, and five of neighboring keys within one accidental, and especially secondary dominants; lastly, type D includes secondary dominants from remote keys, enharmonic progressions, and sudden harmonic shifts. I consider these types as demonstrated in Kittel's treatise, *Der angehende praktische Organist*.

In Stage 2b, after having composed a bassline, students then add figures and middle voices. I illustrate this stage with the help of David Kellner's (c. 1670–1748) *Treulichem Unterricht* (2nd ed., 1737). Kellner's Rule of the Octave, along with his theoretical descriptions, helps us understand how eighteenth-century German students likely approached adding figures to an unfigured bassline.

Finally, I will demonstrate how Stage 2a and 2b of Bach's method worked in practice. The best models come from Bach's students, Kittel and Kirnberger. Multiple-bass chorales figure prominently in both of their pedagogical methods, and they both claim their methods come from Bach.

### Aims

To reconstruct J. S. Bach's pedagogical method using sources from his circle of students, as well as other German contemporaries, because this may illuminate how Bach understood harmony.

### Implications

There were two separate Bach chorale traditions: the first is the well-known vocal tradition based on chorales from Bach's cantatas and passions; the second tradition, evidenced by sources from Bach's students, is not vocal, but keyboard-based. Bach's chorale-based pedagogy intended to bridge from the keyboard style to the vocal style. We should adopt a similar method in our own teaching.

### Keywords

J. S. Bach, new source, historical pedagogy, chorales, harmonization, figured bass, Rule of the Octave.

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