

PART III

Influence and reception

12 Bach as teacher and model

Stephen Daw

Johann Sebastian Bach's activities as a teacher appear to have been both widespread and respected. Nevertheless, the substantial body of evidence concerning his teaching and methods is far from complete or authoritative. Furthermore, the circumstances of each individual pupil and Bach's own changing whim apparently led to a variability of approach. As in other areas of his activity, such inconsistency was probably also the result of the composer's continuing quest for improvement and his almost compulsive thirst for new challenges. Bach seems to have been a highly *creative* teacher, surprisingly so for his historical environment.

There are various ways in which we can identify Bach's pupils:

- 1 Recorded or preserved written evidence from Bach himself (say in a written testimonial) refers to personal instruction. It may also refer to collaboration in performance under his supervision (which is a rather different matter).
- 2 Written or reported evidence from an individual pupil may refer to study with Bach, sometimes with further comment concerning when and how the learning process was effected.
- 3 Sometimes music manuscripts compiled in collaboration with pupils demonstrate an educational purpose; but one needs to be careful here, since there may be many reasons why Bach required copying assistance without any specifically didactic intention.
- 4 Written reports by third parties, stating that others have been, are, or hope to become students of Bach.
- 5 The records of choir schools (the register of Thomasschule alumni, published by B. F. Richter in the *BJb* 1906 and subsequently destroyed, is useful, but it does not cover the *Externer* (day-pupils), including Bach's own sons).¹

Bach had close relations only with those pupils who participated in the elaborate church music and he was only peripherally involved with the less musical pupils, delegating his responsibilities for teaching Latin (see Chapter 2, p. 24, above). The participation of boys as choral ripienists in the courts of Weimar and Köthen does not necessarily imply that they

encountered Bach in a teaching capacity, but it cannot be excluded that some received personal instruction as a result of such contact.

It stands to reason that the better pupils would have been those most associated with Bach in rehearsal and performance, as copyists (particularly in Leipzig), occasionally as privately coached performers (in singing and keyboard continuo) and, in exceptional cases, as students of composition and solo keyboard performance. Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713–80) was accorded such favoured treatment and responded especially well, and there is little doubt that members of the Bach family and other relations were highly eligible to become Bach's students. Indeed relatives from the periphery of the Bach family lodged in Sebastian Bach's own quarters, whether in Weimar, Köthen or Leipzig.²

If we cannot be certain of the extent to which Bach was the teacher even of his Ohrdruf nephews, how much harder it is to be sure of any special pedagogic relationship with, say, his two busiest copyists during the early Leipzig years, Johann Andreas Kuhnau (who copied between February 1723 – for the *Probestück* (Bach's audition piece) – and 30 December 1725) and Christian Gottlob Meissner (also a copyist for the *Probestück*, but working until 1729 as an alumnus and even later – until 1731 – as a university student). Meissner, reportedly a capable singer and the librettist of the homage cantata to Leipzig, 'Apollo et Mercurius' (BWV 216a),³ must have learned much of Bach's system of preparation for performance. Given that the jointly produced performing materials are the only surviving evidence of their cooperation, his profit may have been from Bach's example rather than his direct teaching. The concept of learning by immediate example (study by patterns) is, rather, the most ubiquitous form of discipleship revealed in the present study; indeed this seems to be the method by which Bach himself learned composition (see Chapter 10, pp. 136–40 above).

The closest report we have of a teaching process devised by Bach comes at second hand from the son (Ernst Ludwig) of Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber (b. 1702), who was a pupil of Bach for about two years, apparently from about November 1724. Ernst Ludwig reported (in the first published part of his *Historisch-Bibliographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler*, Leipzig, 1790), that

Bach accepted him with particular kindness . . . and . . . promised to give him the instruction he desired and asked at once whether he had industriously played fugues. At the first lesson he set his Inventions before him. When he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction, there followed a series of Suites, then the *Well-tempered Clavier*. This latter work Bach played altogether three times through to him with his unmatchable art, and my father counted these among his happiest hours, when Bach, under the pretext of not feeling in the mood to teach, sat himself at one of his fine

instruments and thus turned these hours into minutes. The conclusion of the instruction was thorough bass, for which Bach chose the Albinoni violin solos; and I must admit that I never heard anything to surpass the style in which my father executed these basses according to Bach's fashion, particularly in the singing of the voices. This accompaniment was in itself so beautiful that no principal voice could have added to the pleasure it gave me.⁴

A student such as Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber probably paid quite handsomely for his tuition (which was probably not the case with Bach's innermost circle of pupils, i.e. family, sons of former associates, like Ludwig Krebs, and a few pupils taught over a number of years, like Altnikol). The teaching Gerber received seems to have been formally organised, probably with regular lessons. He had already learned something by witnessing Bach at work in both secular and sacred music, since the *Lexicon* mentioned earlier that the young would-be student 'had heard much excellent church music, and many a concert, under Bach's direction' during his first half year in Leipzig, prior to his request for personal tuition.⁵ There is also the reference to Sebastian Bach's playing of *The Well-tempered Clavier* 'under the pretext of not feeling in the mood to teach'. It seems improbable that the composer performed all the preludes and fugues consecutively at one sitting; surely, the reference is to demonstrative playings on many occasions, over the two years, possibly in cyclic groupings.

Bach's inquiry as to whether Gerber 'had industriously played fugues' probably followed a request to hear the prospective pupil improvise; upon hearing him elaborate a chorale or play dance-variations, it would be perfectly reasonable to ask him if he had seriously studied extempore fugue; what is even more interesting is that this expectation from someone of Bach's background and type would have referred both to musical practice (as in improvisation and its potential – though not inevitable – development into notated composition) and to compositional theory (the enabling strategy, upon which any musical practice would need to be securely rooted); perhaps Bach had already become aware of the fascination with which the Gerbers would consider these very relationships. What was probably a negative answer, or a rather clumsy attempt to display ability, could well have resulted in Bach's decision to start work on the Inventions at the first lesson proper.

The reason for Bach's choice of the Inventions (whatever this title actually signifies⁶) as a vehicle for preliminary study is their particularly clear didactic purpose and availability, since Bach had already developed them during the training of his extremely able eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann. Their preface refers quite directly to their various educational applications:

A sincere guide through which lovers of keyboard music, and particularly those anxious to learn, are shown in a clear way not only (1) how to play without error in 2 parts, but also, upon further progress, (2) how to treat three obligato parts correctly and well; and at the same time not only to be inspired with good inventions, but properly to develop them; and most of all to achieve a cantabile manner of playing and to gain a strong appetite to compose.⁷

The eager pupil must invent good musical figures (themes, structures, expressions or whatever cannot be excluded by that vital word, *Inventions*) and then develop them well. This applies equally to improvisation and composition, i.e. to any musical practice, but in his last few words, Bach implies that improvisation comes first, composition being but its (possibly main and ultimate) consequence. The student must play keyboard instruments so that the parts speak clearly and in a singing ('*Cantabile*' – *sic*) way. These words are effectively re-used in the Gerbers' description of Bach's own playing and his teaching of thorough bass. They might allude to the subtle style of finger-attack, applicable to both harpsichord and clavichord, in which the digits are drawn backwards along the keys. Emanuel Bach describes this carefully in his *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, part 1 (Berlin, 1753). It seems that those who listened carefully to Johann Sebastian Bach were specially impressed by his ability to preserve the cantabile sound in several voices (as, for example, in the accompaniments to Albinoni violin sonatas, recalled by Gerber).

Emanuel Bach, writing in reply to Forkel's enquiries in a letter dated 13 January 1775, described his father's learning programme thus:

In composition he started his pupils right in with what was practical, and omitted all the *dry species* of counterpoint that are given in Fux and others. His pupils had to begin their studies by learning pure four-part thorough bass. From this he went to chorales; first he added the basses himself, and they had to invent the alto and tenor. Then he taught them to devise the basses themselves. He particularly insisted on the writing out of the thorough bass in [four real] parts. In teaching fugues, he began with two-part ones, and so on . . . As for the invention of ideas, he required this from the very beginning, and anyone who had none he advised to stay away from composition altogether. With his children as well as with other pupils he did not begin the study of composition until he had seen work of theirs in which he detected talent.⁸

Surviving materials in the hand of Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber show that in the busy 1720s, at least, Sebastian Bach expected his pupils to copy out his own music. He added ornamentation and other details, though barely ever fingering.⁹ It is also apparent that Bach gradually adjusted details of a

textual nature as these supervised copies were completed; this he also did much later in the case of Johann Christoph Altnikol's copy of the second part of *The Well-tempered Clavier*. Thus the teacher's concern was not solely to instruct his pupil in the mastery of the techniques of performance and composition; it also gave occasion to introduce him to finer points of self-criticism and revision such as few composers have chosen ever to share with their more intimate assistants, let alone students.

A few examples survive which illustrate Bach's development of his pupils' harmonic abilities. The first movements of the Sonata in G major for flute, violin and continuo BWV 1038 and of that in F major for violin and continuo BWV 1022 are both apparently student studies over a bass line which Bach had earlier used (and probably even composed) for his own Sonata in G for violin and continuo BWV 1021. Both stem from shortly after the Gerber period, and neither has been seriously considered as Sebastian's own composition (above the bass) since the music of BWV 1021 and commentary upon it were both published in *NBAVI/1* (1958). Each has its own sweet-toothed charm, as do sections of the flute sonata in E \flat BWV 1031. Perhaps all three were written by a young, fashion-conscious Leipzig student, such as Friedrich Gottlieb Wild or Christoph Gottlob Wecker¹⁰ (both of whom were promising composers and useful players of the transverse flute). There survives from the 1740s an attempt, apparently by Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach, to set a bass line beneath a fragment of the Polonaise melody that Bach set in the Overture in B minor BWV 1067/6.

But, surely, most of this kind of learning would have been gained through practical work at keyboard instruments. It seems inevitable that students and alumni would have formed the corpus from which continuo keyboard players were developed for both church and secular use. Bach and his later students (from Christoph Nichelmann on) considered the study of composition to be best achieved through 'devising good ideas' and then developing them. The former was taught by example and exhortation, the latter by keyboard experiment, and by examination and experiment with figured bass.¹¹ Composition was often seen as a component of *Musica practica* in Lutheran Germany during the seventeenth century, but this association diminished quite rapidly subsequently.¹²

It is often difficult to discern which individuals studied thoroughly and individually with Bach in the earlier years. In Weimar, Philipp David Kräuter,¹³ Johann Tobias Krebs (1690–1762)¹⁴ and Johann Caspar Vogler (1693–1763)¹⁵ all studied in a manner similar to Gerber, but using a rather different, less Bach-centred copying repertoire. Probably the same applied to members of the Bach family who joined Sebastian's household; moreover, pupils at the Thomasschule were presumably given tuition based on the contemporary 'usual' copying repertoire.

In 1737, Johann Elias Bach of Schweinfurt arrived in Bach's Leipzig household as a tutor and personal secretary in return for lodgings. This freed Sebastian to undertake more teaching, which was a happy coincidence, since from late May 1738 to 1741 Johann Friedrich Agricola and from 1739 to 1741 Johann Philipp Kirnberger (a former pupil of both J. P. Kellner and H. N. Gerber) both came to Leipzig University. The opportunity to study with Bach was apparently one of their major motives for coming.

The new repertoire they were to learn had broadened to include some of the organ works formerly learned by Tobias Krebs and Johann Caspar Vogler, new concertos, freshly arranged and/or copied by Bach for the *Collegium musicum* concerts, as well as ensemble sonatas and music by Bach's two eldest sons.¹⁶

From March 1744 until January 1748 Johann Christoph Altnikol came to the University with apparently very much the same purpose as Agricola and Kirnberger. He was even encouraged to copy a score of the early version of the St Matthew Passion and later to enjoy the composer's own supervision in the compilation (c. 1743–4) of a new version of *The Well-tempered Clavier* Book II.¹⁷ Altnikol also copied out cantatas in score, perhaps partly so that Johann Sebastian could lend the originals or their copies to his son Wilhelm Friedemann in Halle,¹⁸ or to others.

Of course, Agricola, Kirnberger and Altnikol all continued to copy music by J. S. Bach after their studies were over; they contributed in this way not only to the preservation of the music, but also (since copying was still probably considered to be largely a part of one's practical training in music, *Musica practica*) to its continued performance. The Berlin 'Bach circle' and central Saxony's shorter-lived pockets of Orthodox Lutheran church musicians were consequently enriched and afforded an opportunity to practise what was increasingly seen as a dying art, but nevertheless deserving of preservation in publications (such as Georg Friedrich Kauffmann's *Harmonische Seelenlust* and Bach's own late *Sechs Choräle von Verschiedener Art*) or manuscript anthologies suitable for reference (like J. G. Walther's manuscript preserved in the Hague, where settings of the same chorale by as many as ten different composers are grouped together, presumably for selection).¹⁹

The latest generation of prospective Bach students – the generation represented by Johann Gottfried Mützel (1728–88), Johann Christoph Kittel (1732–1809), Johann Christoph Oley (1738–89) and possibly even the somewhat older Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (?1728–56) – did not have time adequately to study with the master, given Bach's death in 1750; however, without copies made by Kittel, Oley and the Thomasschule student copyist Christian Friedrich Penzel (1737–1801), we should have lost important sources for a very wide range of Bach's music.

Many contemporary admirers of Bach were unable to establish a direct studying relationship with him, yet some of these were extremely active as copyists of his music. Some of them made copies in order to instruct their own pupils, some to pursue their own researches as students, and others for their own practical use. The tracing of lineages from the composer and his family outwards in these ways has been outstandingly well researched by Hans-Joachim Schulze.²⁰ The industrious Johann Peter Kellner (1705–72), for instance, was a practising organist, teacher and scholar working very much in the old-established tradition of *Musica practica*, and using his copies to assemble a wide repertoire of keyboard (mostly organ) and chamber music. His almost complete copy of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites – the oldest preserved source – is remarkable in that they are written partly in *scordatura* for an instrument he very probably did not play, and still contain what appear to be analytical markings to facilitate easy examination of Bach's way of developing 'good ideas'.²¹

Others who collected and in turn disseminated Bach's music through copying – or by commissioning copies – included Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748) and Johann Tobias Krebs (1690–1762), after both had ceased to see Bach regularly, Johann Christoph Preller (1699–1747) and Johann Nikolaus Mempell (1713–47). Kellner, in particular, developed quite an industry for mailing Bach copies from Gräfenroda, where it is easy to picture him sitting, in the rear first-floor window on a summer evening, copying the music with the help by the slowly sinking western sun, with the new Baroque church framing the view of the churchyard to the right.

Naturally there were other local pockets of interest in Bach's legacy, and it was inevitable that some of these would be based around copying, since that was a route through which Bach himself had learned and subsequently taught. There were lasting traditions in Berlin, Hamburg, Thuringia and, as the eighteenth century approached its close, in Vienna, where a circle of intellectuals fostered by Baron van Swieten stimulated Mozart's interest in both Bach and Handel.²² Around the same time, the Nuremberg organist Lorenz Scholz (1720–98) was compiling an interesting collection of manuscripts, mainly of keyboard works by both Johann Sebastian and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. These included a number of fugues, several in alternative versions, besides a very interesting possible early version of the Italian Concerto BWV 971.²³

The value and styles of Bach's oeuvre, which was not immune to criticism even during his lifetime (see Chapter 4, p. 55 above), became a focus for further controversy. Bach's excellence in harmony and in consistent industrious invention began to be used not simply as an example of good

practice, but also as support for preferences to which he would probably never have dreamed of subscribing. Initially, this was mostly confined to disputes over musical theory. In one famous and protracted debate between Kirnberger and Marpurg,²⁴ he was quoted as a supporter of each opposing view. Forkel's biography of 1802 reveals a new preoccupation with Bach as a representative of the whole of German musical literature, and by the time of Philipp Spitta's biography (1873, 1880) Bach had become the foremost representative of the German – and, specifically, the German Lutheran – soul; to some, he was virtually a Protestant saint.

All of this might seem somewhat at odds with the clearly didactic style of some of his prefaces and dedications, but we are wrong to consider these out of context. Title-pages and dedications were usually couched in terms specifically relevant to the early eighteenth century, and Bach's were always scrupulously devout. His vision of resourcing those 'desirous of learning' was naturally restricted to students of his own time and, at best, the immediate future. Immortality, as Handel shows in his setting of *Semele*, is not something to which mortals should ever be inclined to aspire.

Yet from his very modesty and devotion sprang also an acutely self-critical capacity. His striving for greater perfection in preludes and fugues witnessed by his late association with Altnikol was remarkable. If a temporally bound attitude to his own oeuvre could inspire such refinement of technique, then we cannot guess how foreknowledge of a modern veneration of his music might have inhibited, or even – who knows? – further inspired his compositional processes. Perhaps mastery of both composition and instruction came to him as a matter of course, since his faith was so abundantly based on individual and communal discipleship. The best teachers – as well as those who most obviously set examples worth following – never feel that they themselves have nothing more to learn.²⁵