



# About the Author

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## **Johann Sebastian Bach and the *Style Galant*: Progressive Elements in the *Italian Concerto*, BWV 91**

As one of the most preeminent composers of the early eighteenth-century, Johann Sebastian Bach is associated most strongly with the height of the Baroque Era. Intricate polyphony and harmonic complexity remained defining characteristics of his style even toward the end of his life – features that were at times the subject of criticism from his own contemporaries. However, despite the view that Bach remained committed to the musical styles of the past during the emergence of the *style galant*, opuses from the composer’s mid-to-late career suggest that he was both capable and willing to adopt elements of the new fashion into select compositions. An instance of this integration occurs in his acclaimed *Concerto nach Italienischen Gusto* (“Concerto in the Italian taste”), otherwise known as the *Italian Concerto*, BWV 971. Published in 1735 as the first part of the *Clavier-Übung II*, it is among Bach’s most performed works for the double-manual harpsichord. This paper presents an examination of the piece through the lens of the *galant* manner, analyzing its incorporation of key traits from this developing style. Such an investigation is contextualized with a discussion of the historical background surrounding the work, surveying evolving artistic trends as well as eighteenth-century attitudes regarding J. S. Bach, contemporary critical discourse, and the “newer” musical fashion. Through these explorations, Bach will be demonstrated as a composer who, though typically linked with conservative values such as strictly imitative counterpoint and densely-woven harmonic textures, was aware and receptive to modern stylistic qualities when desired.

Widely used to refer to the eighteenth-century movement in the musical arts, the term “galant” originally stemmed from the French vernacular. By the 1700s, the word entailed a close association with the “French courtly manner”, with a particular “emphasis on social or amatory

grace”.<sup>1</sup> Contemporaries of Bach – and not only modern historians – were well-acquainted with using “galant” in reference to the musical realm. This practice is in contrast with the designations of “Baroque” or “Classical” as applied to music from the 1700s – nomenclature which was popularized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and used in retrospect for those respective eras.<sup>2</sup> However, employing these terms to generalize musical development from approximately 1720 to 1780 suggests somewhat of an oversimplification, compartmentalizing the stylistic fluidity found throughout these decades. As Robert Gjerdingen analogizes, “to call the music of the great galant musicians pre-Classical is no more enlightening than to call George Gershwin pre-Rock or Elvis Presley pre-Hip-Hop”.<sup>3</sup> As such, exploring the *galant* style serves an important role in understanding the vibrant mid-eighteenth-century musical scene, which included celebrated figures such as Johann Christian Bach (the “London Bach”), Giovanni Battista Sammartini, and Johann Adolph Hasse.

Initially popularized in Italian opera during the 1720s, the *style galant* is characterized by a set of aesthetic values influenced by the naturalistic philosophies of the Enlightenment movement.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to the “old contrapuntal virtues” that featured dense polyphony, lengthy harmonic progressions, and interwoven dissonances, the newer style prioritized clarity, elegance, and the immediacy of appeal.<sup>5</sup> These attributes were exemplified especially through the “menuet galant” – a genre of instrumental works in the mid-eighteenth century showcasing the increasing importance of noble and “charming decency...united with simplicity”.<sup>6</sup> In particular, *galant* compositions upheld these aesthetic principles through the use of balanced,

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hertz and Bruce Brown, “Galant,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.10512>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” *The Musical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1976): 329.

<sup>5</sup> Hertz, “Galant.”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

frequently cadenced phrase structures, with thinner textures that prioritized a single melodic line with accompaniment, and the integration of popular compositional schemata, as well as slower, aurally lucid harmonic progressions. This treatment of musical parameters signified a gradual shift away from the opaque complexities of the previous era, which was increasingly perceived as contrived and old-fashioned.

The compositional language that Bach is known for today, and which dominated much of his output, represents a contrast with the more “modern” fashions of the *galant*. His *Art of Fugue*, which remained unfinished at the end of his life, is one of the epitomal examples of this rigorous, highly intellectual manner of composing. As such, this work has been viewed as emblematic of Bach’s lifelong dedication to “the venerable skills of strict counterpoint, canon, and fugue”<sup>7</sup>—featuring meticulous, internally imitative musical construction. While Bach was recognized as an accomplished composer (in addition to his widespread appreciation as an organist), his stylistic tendencies occasionally proved to be the subject of criticism. In 1737, music critic and theorist Johann Adolf Scheibe published a well-known reproach of Bach’s compositional style in the journal *Der critische Musikus*. He declared that Bach, “by his bombastic and intricate procedures” had “deprived [his music] of naturalness and obscured their beauty by an excess of art”.<sup>8</sup> His view that Bach’s oeuvre represented an overload of contrapuntal complexity and artificiality was countered by Johann Abraham Birnbaum, initiating a debate that lasted through the late 1730s and early 1740s. This controversy is especially notable as an embodiment of the “clash of irreconcilable stylistic ideals”<sup>9</sup> that took place throughout Bach’s mid-to-late career. The 1735 *Italian Concerto*, however, served a pivotal role in compelling Scheibe to reverse his initial statements, reconciling the debate with a stellar review: “Who is there who will not admit at once

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” 343.

<sup>8</sup> Christoph Wolff and Walter Emery, “Bach, Johann Sebastian” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278195>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a well-designed solo concerto?...[it is] a piece which deserves emulation by all our great composers".<sup>10</sup>

As evidenced by the *Italian Concerto* and beyond, Bach's compositional career was far from stylistically one-dimensional. Throughout his life, he took inspiration from both *stile antico* traditions and *stile moderno* mannerisms while absorbing multiple international influences.<sup>11</sup> In the 1730s and 40s, particularly, Bach's desire to expand his artistic horizons was prompted by his dissatisfaction with his local Leipzig and a "heightened awareness of the excellent and varied musical life being cultivated in nearby Dresden".<sup>12</sup> The assimilation of *galant* traits is one facet of this stylistic synthesis – with notable examples including Cantata 201, *Geschwinde, geschwinde, ihr wirbelnden Winde* (composed in approximately 1729), certain portions of the *Mass in B Minor*, and the *Coffee Cantata* (composed between 1732 and 1735), among others. His secular vocal works, such as the *Coffee* and *Peasant* cantatas, especially exhibit an apparent "aesthetic tolerance and universality"<sup>13</sup>– treating the text with a strikingly light-hearted, humorous compositional approach that reflects influence from the then-modern *opera buffa* genre. As such, by the time Bach penned the *Italian Concerto*, he was well acquainted with integrating elements of the newest fashions into his own works.

Published in 1735, the *Italian Concerto* marks the beginning of the last decade and a half of his life, a period which demonstrated more "conscious gestures toward the style of a younger generation".<sup>14</sup> This is not to say, however, that he abandoned his traditional views of musical ideals; the *Canonic Variations* and *Art of Fugue* are only a few instances in which his conservative rigor is exemplified in full effect towards 1750. The *Italian Concerto* represents an

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<sup>10</sup> Federico Garcia, "The Nature of Bach's 'Italian Concerto' BWV 971," *Bach* 36, no. 1 (2005): 5.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall, "Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works," 342.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 354.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 337.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Noth, "'Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden': Observations on Bach and the 'Style Galant'," *Bach* 23, no. 1 (1992): 28.

openness to the *style galant* rather than a rejection of past values, and its incorporation of fashionable musical idioms makes further sense when considering its integration as part of the *Clavier-Übung II* – a publication compiled for widespread dissemination (especially the second and third movements, which were likely written specifically for inclusion in the volume).<sup>15</sup> The pairing of the *Italian Concerto* with the *French Overture* exemplified Bach’s musical take on the clichéd rivalry of two prevalent styles of the time, both of which had developed in response to the increasingly popular *galant* style.<sup>16</sup> While the music retains Bach’s contrapuntal affinity and sonoric subtleties, it is characterized by a lighter, more modern approach to writing than much of his earlier keyboard works.<sup>17</sup> The constituents of the *Clavier-Übung II*, therefore, can be seen to deliberately showcase qualities meant to appeal – rather directly – to the contemporary forefronts of musical taste.

Throughout the *Italian Concerto*, elements of the *galant* style are evident in Bach’s structural, harmonic, textural, and melodic decisions. Phrasal and cadential organization, in particular, constitutes one of the most revealing aspects of Bach’s integration of the latest fashion. As opposed to the freely spun-out, lengthy, and often improvisatory method of expanding thematic material, Bach chose to utilize balanced, clear-cut, and aurally divisible musical segments. This approach is a distinct contrast to the *fortspinnung* style of the late Baroque, which favored continuous musical drive characterized by asymmetry and extensive arabesques.<sup>18</sup> The opening ritornello of the work presents a clear instance of the *galant* tendency for well-defined, proportionate phrase structure – the square, four-bar segment is immediately repeated a perfect fifth above, in measures 5-8 (see Example 1). Such distinctive motives, separated decisively by a quarter rest, represent a vivid

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<sup>15</sup> Federico Garcia, “The Nature of Bach’s ‘Italian Concerto’ BWV 971,” 19.

<sup>16</sup> David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 348.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” 330.

embodiment of the arithmetic symmetry<sup>19</sup> and clarity sought after in the *galanteria*. In the third movement – written in the popular ritornello form as the first movement – a similar organizational lucidity can be heard. This time, however, elements of progressivity manifest more strikingly on a larger, more structural scale. Beginning at measure 155, for instance, Bach incorporates a “more thorough recapitulation of episodic material” that brings to mind the layout of the “through-composed sonata form common in *galant* concertos of the 1740s and later” (see Example 2).<sup>20</sup> Recapitulatory gestures as such in the outer movements produce a heightened clarity in form that was emphasized in the newer style.

Furthermore, a remarkable balance can be seen from Bach’s phrase-to-phrase structural unity. A prominent instance is found at the very beginning of the *Presto* movement – each musical idea is presented in orderly, four-bar segments, linked together through an audible harmonic and motivic cohesion. The first twelve measures, beginning with the memorable F major scalar motive, is “answered” through the following twelve bars, creating a natural sense of symmetry (see Example 3). This symmetry is heightened when considering measure thirteen’s thematic material, mirroring the introductory idea precisely while forming a resolution to the half cadence of the previous measures. A perfect authentic cadence at bar 24 produces a definitive close to the section (see Example 3). Bars 1-24, then, can be holistically thought of as reminiscent of the structural implications of a parallel period – a formal technique exhibiting essential traits of the *style galant*’s affinity for order, architectural elegance, and cadential punctuation.

A defining element of the *galant* lies in its modest usage of sonorities and a relaxed harmonic rhythm. Whereas Bach’s predominant musical style emphasized complex

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach*, 351-352.

progressions and interwoven dissonances, the *Italian Concerto* features simplified harmonic trajectories and clarity when shifting tonalities. The rate of harmonic change is also slowed down, as typical of the newer musical trends.<sup>21</sup> While these characteristics emerge throughout all three movements, they are especially woven into the musical fabric of the *Andante*. Bars 4-7, or the opening periodic theme, is based upon an underlying progression that returns throughout the movement (see Example 4).<sup>22</sup> This short, repeated harmonic underpinning consists of only three chords: i, iv, and vii<sup>o</sup>7 – a substantial reduction from the lengthy chordal trajectories found in more traditionally Baroque compositions. The harmonic rhythm associated with this recurring theme, furthermore, is at a consistently plodding one-change-per-bar, returning predictably to the tonic sonority with each iteration.

On a larger scale, Bach's treatment of key-changes and cadences are likewise indicative of the *galant* manner. The tonicization of F major at measure 27, for example, is preceded by an extensive pedal point on the dominant from bar 19-25 – unambiguously foreshadowing the new key (see Example 5).<sup>23</sup> This cadential preparation is a prime example of the *galant* practice of incorporating “long, expectant” passages leading organically toward “strongly-articulated ... points of arrival”.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the well-defined arrival point is established through a formulaic perfect authentic cadence, landing satisfactorily in the relative major. Furthermore, Bach's assimilation of the newest cadential practices can be seen through his incorporation of popular schemata. In particular, the *mi-fa-so-dob* bass pattern to signify musical closure had become a “prototypical, standard clausula in galant music”, referred to as the *cadenza semplice*.<sup>25</sup> This figuration features at

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<sup>21</sup> Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” 330.

<sup>22</sup> Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach*, 351.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” 331.

<sup>25</sup> Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, 141.



the end of the first movement, from bars 191-192 (see Example 6), serving as a hallmark of the emerging *galant* idiom.

While counterpoint remains present in the *Italian Concerto*, Bach takes on a decidedly leaner approach to musical texture. Lightness and clarity in the *galant* style was favored over fugal counterpoint; this is evidenced through a transparent divide between melody and accompaniment, as well as a shift towards homophony.<sup>26</sup> The use of vertical chordal figures is especially prominent in the first and third movements, with harmonies being presented in a clear-cut, blocked manner from the beginning (see Examples 1 and 3). From measures 30-41, furthermore, Bach utilizes a texture highly representative of *galant* principles (see Example 7). Here, a sprightly, equally-proportioned melody unfolds over an accompaniment characterized by repeated dyads – a simple figuration emphasizing its role as a harmonic backdrop against a graceful melodic foreground. This thin, yet effective passage is remarkably reminiscent of what could be found in an early Mozartian sonata, effectively embodying the light aesthetic values of the *galant*. In the *Presto*, though “the ritornellos are more contrapuntal than those of the first movement”,<sup>27</sup> Bach often limits the density of his polyphony to a single voice for each hand. Bars 25-32, for instance, are composed of only two individual lines – a simplified polyphony that is easily heard as a melody with an accompanimental countermelody (see Example 8). The simpler melodic idea is marked *forte* by Bach (rather than by a modern publisher), “allowing it to be heard more clearly against the livelier filigree of the other part”.<sup>28</sup> This indication is also made possible by the instrumentation of a double-manual harpsichord, allowing clear dynamic distinctions to be made between the manuals. Such a texture emphasizing aural

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<sup>26</sup> Hertz, “Galant.”

<sup>27</sup> Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach*, 352.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

clarity demonstrates the central *galant* ideal of “disentangling ... from fugue, complication and labored contrivance”.<sup>29</sup>

More than many of Bach’s other compositions, the concept of melody – as understood in the pre-Classical style – plays a central role in the *Italian Concerto*. This manifests through the composers’ choice of motivic and intervallic content, as well as a distinct sense of lyricism found particularly in the second movement. The melody of the *Andante* (see Example 9) is characterized by an expressive, textless melisma that is evocative of operatic arias from the Italian *bel canto* tradition: an art form perceived as an aesthetic “ideal” of the *galant* period.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Bach’s melodic writing exhibits a conscious use of succinct, motivic repetition in addition to prototypical schemata. Measures 91-96, for example, feature three iterations of matching motivic content, leading towards a descending *Fonte*-type gesture (where a brief musical idea in the minor is repeated one step lower in a major mode) in bars 97-98 (see Example 10). This type of configuration can be found in numerous Italian partimenti, and is classified by eighteenth-century theorist Joseph Riepel as a standard *galant* schema.<sup>31</sup> Bach’s usage of “short motivic units”<sup>32</sup> and repetition in this passage are further characteristic of the latest musical fashion (see Example 10). From a more microscopic perspective, this progressivity is also reflected in the subtle intervallic organization of the work. Bach deemphasizes “difficult” – and as Robert Marshall puts it – “poignant” intervals common in the Baroque vocabulary, in favor of intuitive, graceful motion and “sweet” vertical combinations such as parallel thirds and sixths.<sup>33</sup> These values are apparent in the ritornellos of the first movement, featuring

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<sup>29</sup> Hertz, “Galant.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall, “Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works,” 353.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

stepwise parallel thirds (see Example 1), and the pervading, consonant octave-based flourishes in the third movement (Example 3).

While Bach's compositional style was often viewed as conservative, or even archaic during the emergence of the *galant* style, certain works from his mid-to-late career demonstrate a capacity for elements of the latest fashion. The *Italian Concerto* of 1735 presents an exemplary instance of such an inclination, adopting the characteristic *galant* values of simplicity, elegance, and clarity. These principles manifest through various aspects of the musical fabric, and are evidenced through Bach's periodic phrasal organization, textural lightening, and permeating harmonic and melodic choices. In addition, the incorporation of *galant* schemata represents a conscious, creative internalization of the newest musical prototypes. As such, the *Italian Concerto* sheds light on Bach as a multi-dimensional composer, absorbing idioms and influences from the increasingly popular *style galant* into his unique compositional language.

## MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1. First movement, mm. 1-8.

### CONCERTO.

Musical score for Example 1, measures 1-8. The score is in 2/4 time and features a piano accompaniment. The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with some rhythmic variation.

Example 2. Third movement, measure 155 and onwards.

Musical score for Example 2, measures 155 and onwards. The score is in 2/4 time and features a piano accompaniment. The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with some rhythmic variation. The score includes dynamic markings: *piano* at the beginning, *forte* in the middle, and *piano* and *forte* in the final section.

Example 3: Third movement, mm. 1-24.

Musical score for Example 3, Third movement, mm. 1-24. The score is written for piano in G major, 3/4 time, and is marked *Presto.* and *forte*. It consists of four systems of two staves each. The first system includes the tempo and dynamic markings. The music features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand.

Example 4: Second movement, mm 4-7.

Musical score for Example 4, Second movement, mm 4-7. The score is written for piano in G major, 3/4 time, and is marked *forte*. It consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system shows a melodic line in the right hand with a *forte* dynamic marking and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The second system continues the melodic and harmonic development.

Example 5: Second movement, mm. 19-27.

This musical score consists of four systems of music. The first system shows a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, containing a melodic line with a slur and a series of sixteenth notes. The second system is a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff; the upper staff continues the melodic line with a slur, while the lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment of chords. The third system is also a grand staff, with the upper staff featuring a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes and the lower staff continuing the accompaniment. The fourth system shows the final measures, with the upper staff ending on a whole note and the lower staff concluding with a few chords.

Example 6: First movement, mm. 191-192.

This musical score consists of two systems of music. The first system is a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The upper staff contains a melodic line with a slur and a fermata over the final note, while the lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. The second system shows the continuation of the melodic line in the upper staff and the accompaniment in the lower staff, ending with a final chord.

Example 7: First movement, mm. 30-41.

Musical score for Example 7, measures 30-41. The score is written for two staves. The upper staff is marked *forte* and the lower staff is marked *piano*. The music features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes and rests. The lower staff has a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The piece is identified as B.W. 111.

Example 8: Third movement, mm. 25-32.

Musical score for Example 8, measures 25-32. The score is written for two staves. The upper staff is marked *piano* and the lower staff is marked *forte*. The music features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes and rests. The lower staff has a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The piece is identified as B.W. 111.

Example 9: Second movement, mm. 1-12.

The musical score for Example 9, Second movement, mm. 1-12, is presented in four systems. The tempo is marked "Andante." and the key signature has one flat. The first system begins with a "piano" dynamic marking in the right hand and a "forte" dynamic marking in the left hand. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The second system continues the melodic development in the right hand. The third system shows a more active right hand with sixteenth-note passages. The fourth system concludes the excerpt with a final melodic phrase in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand.

Example 10. First movement, mm. 91-98.

The musical score for Example 10, First movement, mm. 91-98, is presented in two systems. The key signature has one flat. The first system consists of two staves with a complex rhythmic texture, featuring sixteenth-note runs and chords. The second system continues this texture, showing a dense and intricate musical passage with rapid sixteenth-note passages in both hands.



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