

STUDIES IN EARLY MUSIC II
THE HIGH BAROQUE
(PROFESSOR WHITE)
Final essay
‘Aria technique in BWV170’

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11 December 2009

1 Introduction

BWV170 was composed in Leipzig in 1726, and is for the sixth Sunday after Trinity. The cantata belongs to the third *Jahrgang*. Written for solo alto and small orchestra consisting of organ, flute, oboe d’amore, violin, and continuo, it is one of a number of solo cantatas for alto which Bach set to texts by the librettist Georg Christian Lehms around this period.¹ Bach had also used texts by Lehms in his cantatas as early as his Weimar period.

The cantata displays the architectural symmetry that seems to be characteristic of many of Bach’s Leipzig cantatas. It features no chorus, and is without the “chorale frame” which he used on many occasions (Boyd, p. 121). The cantata starts and ends in the same key — D major.²

1.1 The libretto

The libretto is based on a text by Georg Christian Lehms. Bach’s musical treatment of the text correlates with Stephen A. Crist’s observation — regarding the aria forms in Bach’s first Leipzig *Jahrgang* — that ‘arias with relatively short texts tend to be in *da capo* form while those with longer texts are more often in non-repeating or other forms’ (Crist: 89, p. 44). This is portrayed in the table below (see Table 1). Crist’s observation is clearly valid here. The only

Table 1: Aria forms in BWV170

Movement	No. of lines	Form
1	6	<i>da capo</i> (free)
3	9	through-composed
5	5	<i>da capo</i> (strict)

aria which is in through-composed form is the third movement, which is nine lines in length. The remaining two arias, with their significantly shorter texts,

¹See (Kreuscher), pp. 1–2.

²The excerpts referred to here are based on the The Bach-Gesellschaft Edition of the work, which is available at http://imslp.org/wiki/Cantatas,_BWV_161-170_%28Bach,_Johann_Sebastian%29 (Accessed December 8 2009). This edition of the work does not contain bar numbers unfortunately.

are treated as *da capo* forms.

The singer's introspective monologue in this cantata expresses a deep disenchantment with the prevailing iniquity in her surroundings.

‘ Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen,
Die dir, mein Gott, so sehr zuwider sein; ’

she sings at the beginning of the second aria. (‘What sorrow fills me for these wayward spirits, who have, my God, so much offended thee’.) W. Murray Young suspects that, given Bach's circumstances at the time (1726), he possibly felt a particular affinity with Lehms' text — that it was a particularly apposite expression of his own disenchantment with the selfishness he witnessed in Leipzig society.³ The truth or untruth of this conjecture aside, anyone with a discerning ear will hardly fail to recognise how adequately Bach meets the demands of the libretto he has selected. And, like so much of Bach's music (whether it was a reflection of his personal circumstances or not), the arias in BWV170 offer a powerful medicine for those afflictions which Lehms' text alludes to.

In this essay, I have tried to identify some of the prominent characteristics of these arias, and to illustrate one or two of the techniques that Bach seems to have deployed in their construction.

2 General characteristics of the arias

2.1 The structural significance of the ritornello

‘Handel's ritornello constitutes nothing like the tectonic nucleus we see in Bach's, a nucleus both subsuming and as it were generating the aria's context’ (Brainard, p. 26).

All but fewer than three percent of Bach's arias begin with a ritornello, a statistic which does not necessarily correlate with the practice of his contemporaries.⁴ Furthermore, Bach's *da capo* arias *always* commence with a ritornello. The exceptions only appear in his non-*da capo* forms. This fact alone alerts us to their possible significance in his compositional practice.

Paul Brainard suggests that the composition of the ritornello constituted the most significant expenditure of effort in Bach's aria compositions. Noting

³See (Young).

⁴See (Crist: 96, p. 73).

that ‘[t]he advance notation of ritornello themes makes up a large and significant proportion of his [Bach’s] “sketching” activity’, Brainard suggests that ‘once the ritornello “sits” and the vocal opening is under way, the main compositional hurdles [for Bach] have already been crossed’ (Brainard, pp. 24,25). The instances of ritornello quotation in the arias of BWV170 referred to below are strongly suggestive of a forward-planning in Bach’s ritornello construction. Brainard explains that there are occasional instances in Bach’s arias which evidence a possible retroactive influence of the vocal sections on the ritornello.⁵ It seems, however, to have been more commonly the other way around.

The generative power of the ritornello alluded to in Brainard’s quote above is clearly attested throughout BWV170. In the A section of the opening aria, for example, material from the ritornello provides a sort of substrate upon which the vocal part leaves its inscription. To cite just one instance, at the beginning of the A section (bars 9–10), the Oboe d’amore plays the *Vordersatz* from the ritornello unaltered. Indeed, there is little in the ensemble material of the A section that we have not heard already in the ritornello. Almost all that is new is presented to us by the alto. And when we consider that the *Fortspinnung* is motivically derived from the opening gesture (*Vordersatz*), Bach’s ability to generate the framework of an entire aria from a single motif becomes apparent. As Westrup observes, ‘[w]hat is common to all of them [viz. Bach’s arias] is his extraordinary capacity for developing even the simplest material into a coherent work of art’ (Westrup, p. 40).

Paul Brainard has referred to the ritornello in Bach’s arias as constituting, in many cases, a “distillation” of the aria’s essence (Brainard, p. 26). And consideration of the arias in BWV170 will help us to appreciate the aptness of this term. As Brainard further explains, the ritornello, in one sense, very often *is* the aria. Alluding to the same phenomenon, Laurence Dreyfus suggests that ‘the truly striking feature about the Bachian ritornello is its ability to distill, rationalize, and contain the essential properties of the harmonic system in a tonal microcosm’ (Dreyfus, p. 333).

2.2 Ritornello subdivisions

Many of Bach’s ritornello structures are amenable to division into three elements — which Dreyfus refers to as the *Vordersatz*, the *Fortspinnung* and the

⁵See (Brainard), p. 30.

Epilog.⁶ These terms might be translated, loosely, as ‘opening statement’, ‘development’ or ‘spinning out’, and ‘ending’ respectively. The boundaries between these elements is not always clear however. In the ritornello of the opening aria of the presently-discussed cantata (see Figure 1), for example, where does the *Fortspinnung* end and the *Epilog* begin? And these divisions are less easy to discern in the ritornello of the third movement (second aria), where the elaborate counterpoint between the two organ voices leads to overlapping of phrases (see Figure 3). Such potential ambiguities notwithstanding, these terms help to convey a structural integrity which is characteristic of many of Bach’s ritornellos. The elements exhibit an interdependence such that the removal of one would violate the integrity of the construction as a whole.

Whether or not the structural integrity alluded to here was a commonplace in Baroque ritornello construction cannot be explored in depth in this essay. One or two observations regarding the music of Bach’s contemporaries merit mention however. Certain scholars have disclosed similar characteristics in the arias of Johann Joseph Fux — viz. the use of *Einbau* technique and the adherence of the ritornello to the afore-mentioned terminological divisions.⁷ Worthy of brief mention, also, are the observations of Paul Brainard on the differences in the ritornellos of Bach and Handel.⁸ Many of Handel’s ritornellos, according to Brainard, could be regarded as consisting of autonomous musical segments. Brainard’s examination of Handel’s composing scores has given us insight into certain aspects of Handel’s approach to ritornello design — one which seems to differ significantly from that of Bach.

Unlike the phrase elements in some of Handel’s ritornellos, which Handel subjects to excision, transplantation, and reshuffling,⁹ each element in the ritornello of BWV170/I (see Figure 1) is clearly the successor of its forebear. And ultimately, it’s hard to conceive of it being otherwise. As Brainard explains, the composition of Bach’s ritornellos ‘may be likened to that of prose discourse, in which one thought is the premise of its successor’ (Brainard, pp. 30–31).

⁶See (Dreyfus).

⁷See (White).

⁸See (Brainard).

⁹See (Brainard), p. 26.

2.3 Borrowing and embedding

The arias discussed here exhibit two types of relationship between the material in the ritornello and the vocal sections. The first involves the use of the *Einbau* (“embedding”) technique — in which the vocal part sings counterpoint to material from the ritornello. The ritornello material, in this context, might be regarded as an ‘empty sign’, which only attains meaning once the vocal part is ‘embedded’ in it later in the aria.¹⁰ The second involves the appearance of material from the ritornello *in the vocal part itself*.

BWV170 is not unique in this regard, of course. Such treatment of the ritornello material has been widely noted throughout Bach’s *oeuvre*. And when Paul Brainard writes of ‘Bach’s strong penchant for alternating vocal quotation [of material from the ritornello] with long stretches of *Einbau*’ (Brainard, p. 26), it is these very techniques of borrowing and embedding that he is referring to. The technique of *Einbau* is employed to beautiful effect in both the aria *Kreuz Und Krone Sind Verbunden* from cantata BWV12, and the ‘Agnus Dei’ from the *Mass in B Minor*, to cite just two examples. The cantata under present consideration presents further fine examples.

3 Individual movements

3.1 Movement 1

This aria, which Young refers to as ‘an exquisite slumber song’ (Young, p. 126), is a free *da capo* aria. The rhyming scheme is *abbacc*. Various stages of the obligato melody in the ritornello (Figure 1) might be regarded as corresponding, loosely, to the *Vordersatz*, *Fortspinnung* and *Epilog* elements identified by Fischer and Dreyfus (Dreyfus, p. 330).¹¹ An example of *Fortspinnung* can be observed in Violin I, bars 5–7.

It is difficult to imagine a more compelling setting to music of the text which Bach worked with in this instance, so superbly are the two elements married. The alto sings of its longing to take leave of this world, and to enter the eternal bliss.

‘Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust,

¹⁰See (White), p. 34.

¹¹These are identified as ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ respectively, in the extract.

Figure 1: BWV170/I: ritornello (continuo and oboe d'amore only)

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for the ritornello of BWV 170/I, specifically for the continuo and oboe d'amore parts. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff joined by a brace. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/8. Section A (measures 1-3) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the treble and a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes in the bass. Section B (measures 4-5) shows a more melodic line in the treble with a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass. Section C (measures 8-10) includes a trill (tr) in the treble staff and continues the melodic and rhythmic motifs from the previous sections.

Dich kann man nicht bei Höllensünden,
 Wohl aber Himmelseintracht finden.⁷

she begins. ('Contented rest, below'd inner joy, we cannot find thee midst hell's mischief, but rather in the heav'nly concord'.) The introspective and virtuous qualities of the text receive such a poignant treatment in Bach hands that even the most unemotional listener might be given cause for reflection.

The alto enters with what Stephen Crist refers to as a vocal motto — '[s]hort passages that are sung before the vocalist's principal entrance' (Crist: 96, p. 74). After a brief instrumental interlude, it begins again, this time in earnest. The opening statement from the ritornello reappears alongside the voice throughout the A section. An example is given in Figure 2. Indeed, in the A section, both the *Vordersatz* and the *Fortspinnung* elements of the Ritornello appear in varying guises. Even a casual examination will reveal that the ritornello is a 'determinant of context' throughout the entire aria.¹²

The almost equal significance of the B section is a characteristic of many

¹²See (Brainard), p. 25.

Table 2: Structure of BWV170/I (R = ritornello; r = curtailed ritornello)

	Text	Bars	Key(s)
R		1–8	I-V-I
A	{ 1. Vergnügte Ruh', beliebte Seelenlust, 1, 1 2. Dich kann man nicht bei Höllensünden, 3. Wohl aber Himmelseintracht finden; 4. Du stärkst allein die schwache Brust 4, 1	9–26	I-V
R		26–32	V
B	{ 5. Drum sollen lauter Tugendgaben 6. In meinem Herzen Wohnung haben 1, 5, 6, 5, 6	32–42	V-I-vi-ii-vi
r		42–44	vi
A'	{ 1, 1, 4, 4, 1	44–53	vi-I
R		53–61	I

Figure 2: BWV170/I: Example of *Einbau*, bars 9–10 (Oboe d'amore, alto, and continuo only)

Ver - gnüg - te Ruh, be - lieb - te See - lenlust

of Bach's arias which, Crist informs us, distinguishes them from those of his contemporaries, who generally considered the B section as 'little more than a bridge between A and its repeat' (Crist: 96, p. 77). Johann Adolph Scheibe, in 1730 (only four years after BWV170 was composed) reported that "[i]n general, the da capo [A section] is three to four times longer than the other [B] section" (Crist: 96, p. 77). Perhaps the relative significance of the B section in this

instance reflects an unwillingness on Bach's part to sacrifice parts of the text he was working with. Or maybe it attests to a desire for compositional symmetry and balance.

The transition from the end of the B section to the beginning of the A' section — sharing the key of the relative minor, and separated by only a bar's interlude (a sort of curtailed ritornello) — is so seamless as to almost evade perception. The A' section itself is significantly shorter than the first A section, and contains only lines one and four of the text. Lines two and three have been excised. We thus witness the truth in Crist's assertion that 'the longer an opening sentence is, the less well it lends itself to repetition at the end of the movement' (Crist: 89, p. 44).

The closing ritornello is altered to stay in the tonic. It doesn't feature a modulation to the dominant. The distinction is signalled by a 'c' in the upper part — rather than a 'b' — on the final beat of the second bar of the ritornello. And thus concludes Bach's treatment of the first section of Lehms' libretto.

3.2 Movement 3

This aria is in the key of f-sharp minor. The libretto is nine lines. The rhyme scheme is *ababccdda*. Such a long text does not succumb easily to *da capo* treatment. Perhaps this is the reason that Bach chose to set this as a through-composed aria.

The aria is remarkable for its lack of a basso continuo element. Indeed, all it has to offer in the way of support in the lower registers is a bare viola, which is predominated by the motif shown in Figure 4. This falling quaver motif appears throughout the aria — both as a counterpoint to the voice, and in the voice itself. Instances in which it appears in the voice are chromatically altered (e.g. bars 32–34), but otherwise unmistakable.

The organ in the A section essentially paraphrases the material from the ritornello, while the voice provides counterpoint. The motif in the organ in bar 4 (marked 'B' in Figure 3) is seen again in the voice in bars 29–31 and 49–51 (see Figure 5).

The aria ends on a bare octave.

Table 3: Structure of BWV170/III

	Text	Bars	Key(s)
R		1–9	i-v-iv-i
A	{ <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen, 2. Die dir, mein Gott, so sehr zuwider sein; 2. 3. Ich zittre recht und fühle tausend Schmerzen, 4. Wenn sie sich nur an Rach und Hass erfreun. 4. 	10–27	i-v-iv-i-III
B	{ <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Gerechter Gott, was magst du doch gedenken, 6. Wenn sie allein mit rechten Satansränken 7. Dein scharfes Strafgebot so frech verlacht. 7. 	27–44	v-ii-i-v-VII
C	{ <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Ach! ohne Zweifel hast du so gedacht: 9. Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen! 9. 9. 9. 	44–57	iv-i
	<i>da capo</i>		

3.3 Movement 5

The general character of this aria, which strictly adheres to the *da capo* form, is jubilant and uplifting. The restlessness of both the vocal and instrumental parts conveys the nervous joy the singer feels as they contemplate their earthly departure. ‘Mir ekelt mehr zu leben, drum nimm mich, Jesu, hin!’ (‘I’m sick to death of living, so take me, Jesus, hence!’) they exclaim. The text is five lines in length, with a *acbbc* rhyming scheme.

Unlike the opening *da capo* aria, the A section in this aria has a bipartite structure. The first sentence, which consists of two lines, is initially presented in A₁, and then repeated in A₂. In between the subsections is a full iteration of the ritornello, albeit in the dominant. According to Crist, Bach ‘seems to have considered the structure of the A section to be one of many variables that

Figure 3: BWV170/III: Ritornello

The image displays a musical score for the Ritornello of BWV 170/III by J.S. Bach. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). It consists of five systems of staves, each with three staves (treble, middle, and bass clefs). The first system (measures 1-2) includes a first ending bracket labeled 'A' above the first staff. The second system (measures 3-4) includes a second ending bracket labeled 'B' above the first staff. The third system (measures 5-6) includes a trill ornament (tr) above the first staff. The fourth system (measures 7-8) includes a first ending bracket labeled 'A' above the first staff. The fifth system (measures 9-10) includes a trill ornament (tr) above the first staff. The score features intricate melodic lines, including sixteenth-note runs and trills, and a steady bass line.

could be changed at will from one aria to the next' (Crist: 96, p. 76). Although a bipartite A section was the more convention during this period, Bach more

Figure 4: BWV170/III: Falling quaver-motif

wenn si-e alle-in mit rech-t-en Satans Ran

Figure 5: BWV170/III: Vocal quotation of ritornello material

ge - den - - - - ken

wie jam - - - - mern mich do-ch die

commonly used an undivided one.¹³

The vocal part commences with a vocal motto one bar in length, before allowing the ensemble to play a brief two-bar interlude. It then continues uninterrupted, commencing in earnest. Crist refers to this as a “false start” (Crist: 96, p. 75). Bach perhaps sometimes used these mottos to emphasize a particular aspect of the text. The vocal motto, in this instance, and unlike that in the opening movement, is an exact imitation of the melody which appears in the continuation. Crist informs us that, while the vocal mottos of other composers was usually an exact imitation, Bach’s often exhibited significant alterations from the melody proper — as in the opening aria of this cantata.¹⁴

The A section of the aria begins and ends in the tonic. Thus, no recomposition is necessary in the repeat of this section. And the aria is in strict *da capo* form.

That the ritornello is a determinant of context throughout the vocal sections is unambiguous. Its material is quoted both by the ensemble and, less frequently, in the alto part. The alto’s opening motto in the A section is clearly a citation of the *Vordersatz* from the ritornello obligato for example (see Figure 6). The

¹³See (Crist: 96), p. 75.

¹⁴See (Crist: 96), p. 75.

Table 4: Structure of BWV170/V

	Text	Bars	Key(s)
R		1–8	I
A ₁	{ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mir ekelt mehr zu leben, 1. 2. Drum nimm mich, Jesu, hin! 1. 1. 1. 2. 1. 1. 2. 	9–22	I-V
R		22–30	V
A ₂	{ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1. 2. 1. 1. 2. 	30–39	V-I
R		39–47	I
B	{ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Mir graut vor allen Sünden, 4. Laß mich dies Wohnhaus finden, 5. Wo selbst ich ruhig bin. 5. 3. 4. 5. 5. 	48–60	vi-iii
<i>da capo</i>			

voice is paired with the Oboe d'amore and the organ obligato in this context. Bars 14–17 exhibit sequence in the vocal part — an affective device which helps

to convey a sense of anticipation, of restlessness. One can also observe the use of sequence in the voice in A_2 .

Figure 6: BWV170/V: Vocal borrowing from ritornello

Mir e-kelt mehr zu le-ben

Further observations worth noting are that the opening vocal motif in A_2 (bars 30–31) is in essence an extended version of that in A_1 (bars 8–9). The rhythm and melodic contour is predominantly the same. Also, the vocal part is paired with the ensemble occasionally (e.g. in bars 16–17).

4 Broader perspectives

Before concluding, it is perhaps worth considering again briefly these arias in their wider context, and reminding ourselves of some of the ways in which Bach set himself apart from his contemporaries. Stephen Crist, who has carried out a comprehensive survey of Bach's arias, believes that 'Bach treated the aria form differently from most of his contemporaries: he viewed it as a limitless network of possibilities rather than an inflexible mold' (Crist: 89, p. 53).

Although only a quarter of Bach's arias are in strict *da capo* form, they nonetheless reach approximately 170 in number. They thus constitute an amount comparable to the number of *da capo* arias of his contemporaries such as Johann Fux. Such a close acquaintance with the *da capo* form surely provided Bach with a keen discernment as to when its deployment was appropriate, and when it was not. In light of this observation, it seems reasonable to suggest that Bach's choice of form was not arbitrary, and that the predominance of aria forms other than the strict *da capo* did not reflect a cavalier disregard for stylistic conventions. More credible is the idea that Bach, when confronting the challenge of setting a text to music, made a judicious and careful discrimination based on a wealth of experience.

Pertaining to this issue also is the disclosure provided by Stephen Crist

regarding the relationship between the libretto texts at Bach's disposal and the form of the arias in which they appeared. The length and rhyming scheme of the texts, it seems, had significant bearing on the eventual structure. Crist's survey pertained primarily to the first cycle of cantatas which Bach composed at Leipzig. Yet his observations seem valid in the case of BWV170 also, composed as it was only two or three years later.

Bach's readiness to succumb to stylistic conventions is perhaps not easy to discern. That of approximately 700 arias by Bach which have been preserved only 170 are in strict *da capo* form might be regarded as significant by some observers. Crist, for example, suggests that '[t]he radical disparity between the relatively low percentage of Bach arias in *da capo* form and its virtual monopoly in the music of his contemporaries throws into sharp relief his unusually flexible approach to this most conventional of genres' (Crist: 96, p. 79). In any case, it is opportune that the cantata focused on in this brief analysis, BWV170, exhibits a cross-section of the aria forms (see Table 1) which feature in Bach's *oeuvre*. It is noteworthy, in those instances when Bach *does* choose a conventional form, how inexhaustibly he explores its potential. And the *da capo* arias in BWV170 demonstrate how eminently capable he was of reconciling an effervescent musical imagination with the stylistic demands which these forms presented.

Westrup believes that Bach's arias and duets 'are the chief glory of the cantatas' (Westrup, p. 33). Incidentally, Westrup's comment is quite pertinent to the cantata discussed here — featuring only arias and recitatives as it does. And although Westrup's assertion should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt (the choruses no doubt have glories of their own), there is certainly much to be savoured in the arias discussed. As Johann Forkel once explained, this is not music which 'arrest[s] our attention momentarily but grips us the stronger the oftener we listen to it' (Westrup, p. 60).

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