

# Notes on the Program

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## **Fuga (Ricercata), from Musikalisches Opfer (Musical Offering), BWV 1079**

### **Johann Sebastian Bach**

The genesis of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Musikalisches Opfer* (*Musical Offering*) can be traced to a visit he paid in May 1747 to his second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, who since 1740 had been employed in Potsdam as an overworked and underpaid harpsichordist and chamber musician to the flute-playing monarch Frederick II ("the Great"), King of Prussia. Frederick had been badgering C.P.E. about getting his father, the renowned organist and composer, to make the journey from Leipzig. When Bach senior finally arrived, Frederick escorted him through the palace, stopping to have him improvise on each of the keyboard instruments they encountered, working with a theme the king had given him at his request. After returning home, Bach revisited the theme, expanded on his invention, and dedicated the result to the monarch (see sidebar, opposite).

In the *Musical Offering*, Bach pursued an obsession of his final decade: large-scale, cyclical works in which he exhaustively explored the contrapuntal possibilities of a single theme in different musical contexts. He had already carried out such an exercise brilliantly in his *Goldberg Variations* (1741–42), and at the time of the *Musical Offering* he was also writing his *Canonic Variations on "Vom Himmel hoch,"* for organ (June 1747), and was in the midst of what would be the valedictory fruition of this passion, *The Art of Fugue* (1745–50).

The *Musical Offering* was published in September 1747, four months after the composer's visit to Potsdam. It appeared in an edition of 100 copies, each of which comprised five

smaller booklets containing several movements apiece. This curious format seems not to have been arbitrary: a compelling musicological argument suggests that the five divisions correspond to the structure of a classical Quintilian oration — not at all far-fetched, given the sway of Latin rhetorical theory in Bach's Germany. The work's 17 movements — a series of musico-intellectual canons, fugues, and ricercars — are thus assigned different functions in terms of musical discourse, from the introductory *exordium* through to a summation in the four movements of the *Sonata sopr'il Sogetto Reale* (often referred to simply as the Trio Sonata) and, to conclude, a brief final perpetual canon.

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### **IN SHORT**

**Born:** March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Thuringia (Germany)

**Died:** July 28, 1750, in Leipzig, Saxony

**Work composed:** 1747; dedicated to Frederick II, King of Prussia; orchestrated by Anton Webern (1883–1945) from November 1934 to January 21, 1935; dedicated to Edward Clark

**World premiere:** unknown; orchestration premiered on April 25, 1935, in London, with Webern conducting a BBC Orchestra broadcast

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** Webern's orchestration premiered on November 29, 1953, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** March 17, 2007, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 8 minutes

Apart from the Trio Sonata, Bach specified no instrumentation for his *Musical Offering*, so some editorial judgment must be exercised if the piece is to be performed. In 1934–35 Anton Webern, one of Schoenberg’s chief acolytes and an aficionado of musical intellectuality, created this setting of the six-part *Fuga (Ricercata)* — “Ricercar,” as it is generally known, being an antique term for a fugal composition — in a style that he hoped would underscore aspects of the music in an analytical way. He wrote to the conductor Hermann Scherchen:

My orchestration attempts ... to reveal the inter-relation of motifs. This was not always easy. Of course, it also seeks to show how I see the character of the work. ... Isn’t the point to awaken what is still sleeping in the secrecy of Bach’s abstract rendering, which makes it all but nonexistent for almost everyone, or at least completely incomprehensible?

**Instrumentation:** flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, timpani, harp, and strings.

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## Genesis

Drawing from a newspaper report in the *Berliner Nachrichten* on May 11, 1747, and from anecdotal accounts, Johann Sebastian Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nicolaus Forkel, related the composer’s encounter with Frederick II, when the King of Prussia asked him to improvise on various keyboards during a palace tour:

He asked the King to give him a subject for a fugue in order to execute it immediately without any preparation. The King admired the learned manner in which his subject [i.e., the musical theme] was thus executed extempore and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, expressed a wish to hear also a fugue with six obbligato parts. But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony, Bach chose one himself and immediately executed it to the astonishment of all present in the same magnificent and learned manner as he had done that of the King. ... After his return to Leipzig, he composed the subject which he had received from the King in three and six parts, added several intricate pieces in strict canon on the subject, had it engraved, under the title of *Musikalisches Opfer*, and dedicated it to the inventor.



The Flute Concert of Sanssouci, by Adolph Menzel, depicting Frederick II playing the flute, accompanied by C.P.E. Bach on the harpsichord