

On Bach's Sinfonias – Three-part Inventions (BWV 787-801)

In 1723, while still in Köthen, just before moving to Leipzig, Bach edited the fair-copy of his 15 two part “Inventions” (BWV 772-786), and the 15 three-part “sinfonias” and they appeared together. In an earlier version they appeared already in a booklet (*Klaverbüchlein*) prepared for his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann in 1720. Wilhelm was about 9 years old then, and Bach began to teach him. The Inventions are called there *Preambulae* and the Sinfonias – *Fantasiae*. The sinfonias were very probably written after the inventions. They are the same number (15), in the same keys and more or less the same lengths, but naturally somewhat more complicated and difficult. All 30 works were not published in Bach's life, but widely circulated and copied.

These sinfonias are 15 musical jewels. Generally, they are highly contrapuntal, written as short Fugues of a kind, with the three voices taking the main theme in succession in the tonic, dominant and tonic again, and then developed and repeated with episodes in the sequel. The main obvious difference is that the main theme is introduced with a bass accompaniment, while in a fugue it is introduced alone, continuing often with a counter subject while the next voice takes the main subject. Like in many of the fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier I (which appeared in the same year 1723), there is an episode before the third voice's taking the subject in the exposition, and some episodes later – all built from the basic materials of the subject.

Besides their beauty, masterly thematic, contrapuntal and harmonic sophistication, they exhibit a careful didactic quality, where all are of similar length and level of difficulty.

It is difficult to know whether Bach meant all the 30 pieces as one work, or perhaps as two (15+15), or, as we shall do here, to treat each one as a work in itself. From this point of view, much of the literature that treat the corpus as a whole, appears to have little relevance to our concerns. I shall just remark one transparent feature of the sinfonias: They are generally organized in couples of a vivid rhythmic, relatively fast one, in the major (1, 3, 6, 8, ...) and a much heavier, slow and contemplative one in the minor (2, 4, 7, 9, ...). An exception, as in many other respects, is no.5 in Eb, and in the last two (14 and 15) the order is reversed.

I presume the reader to have the music notes open before him. Numbers in parenthesis refer to bars. Unless otherwise indicated, music examples are from the beginnings of the works.

See also my earlier article “On Bach's Counterpoint in the Inventions” (also in this site).

No 1 in C – There are two scale-themes, one ascending (upper voice of 1) and one descending (middle voice from 6). There are two main parts in the work: The exposition, and the development (beginning in 7). There is a special importance to the descending third, G – F – E in the upper voice (1-2) and its parallels in all the voices (e.g. C-B-A in the middle voice of (8-9), also in diminutions like in the beginnings of (3) and (4) and also in the inverses. It reaches a peak in C-Bb-A (17) which is perhaps the dramatic climax of the piece. The scale-character of the themes may tempt one to play it rather technically and too fast. However, one should take care to play *cantabile* (as Bach instructs in his Preface) and in this spirit also to diligently separate the 2 voices in the right hand e.g. in (3, 13-14, 17, 19).

Here the beginning and m.6



No.2 in C minor – This one is thematically more multifarious than most other sinfonias: there are two main subjects and a secondary one. This variety is sort of balanced by the wide, measured character of the piece. The main theme is constructed out of two motifs: the one is built on the triad chord and the other on an up and down scale. One can discern three parts: an exposition (up to 19); a development (19-28); a closing section (28 to the end), which combines the main theme and the secondary one in a stretto-like texture. The secondary theme is introduced as a trivial connecting theme (5) but acquires an important status in the sequel (inverse in 8, 14-15, 17-18, and straight and inversed in 18). In the second half of the first part (from 9) the lower voice takes the main theme and the middle one – the secondary. Here the beginning and mm. 5-6



No.3 in D – This sinfonia, in sharp contrast to the one before and the one after it, projects a somewhat light and smiling character. This, however, does not detract of its dense contrapuntal and structural construction. The main theme is introduced as a sort of a dialogue of two and a half bars between a rising third and a descending second. It is repeated in the dominant, where the opening motif is developed in a sort of variation in the accompaniment in the left hand (3) that emphasizes an ascending fourth, which proves to be important in the sequel. This exposition gets an intensive development (from 6) that brings to the relative minor (b, 12) and from there to III (F# minor, 14). There we have another development in a form of a stretto that leads to IV (G, 19) and back to D. The opening theme is repeated there in the middle voice (21), whereas the accompanying theme is in upper voice. The work ends with the texture of the opening phrase that was in the dominant (3), but is now in the tonic.



No. 4 in D minor – Although thematic economy is typical of most of the sinfonias, this work displays it in an extreme way: one basic motif, at the beginning of the first theme is the basic material of the whole work. In the exposition the main theme is introduced in the three voices (upper, middle, lower). An episode after the second entry leads to the lower one, which is intensified (6) and brings the exposition to its end on the relative major (F, 8). In spite of the rich contrapuntal texture, a motif of a rising third (the high notes F – G – A, in 1-3) is maintained

throughout, and is concentrated in the accompanying voice right at the beginning. In (8) a development begins, consisting of various modulations of the basic motif. A long chromatic descent in the middle voice (12-13) is repeated in the upper one towards the end (end of 21), and just before it the main theme returns once more in the tonic in the lower voice.



No.5 in Eb major – This sinfonia is quite exceptional in the corpus in that the two upper voices make the contrapuntal texture, which often proceeds in parallel movement, while the lower one, in the left hand, participates in giving the harmonic base in broken chords. The harmony is quite rich and its pace proceeds mostly in two per bar. The main theme is 8 bars and consists of three descending thirds (Eb- D-C; F-Eb-D; G-F-Eb) and its main motif (in the two upper voices) is characterized by a dotted rhythm, ending with an appoggiatura. This persists throughout the work. As in many of Bach’s works there is a duality of the dominant between the relative parallel (13) and the V (e.g. (17). The relative parallel of a major is usually in the minor, but here it is sometimes in the major (e.g. 21), serving as V to II (f minor, 25). The repeat of the main theme, towards the end, is in IV (Ab, 29).



No.6 in E major – This is again a vivid and fast sinfonia, somewhat in the spirit of No. 1. The main motif (middle voice of 1) is a scale-like ascent of two thirds ending with a turn leading to the second motif, which is a heavy and slow rise of a third, and a descent of a fifth back to e. The second motif serves as a sort of counter-subject to the main one which is taken by the upper voice (2) and then the lower one (3). The transition (11-16), after the exposition, from the relative parallel (C#) to the dominant (B), displays a somewhat new texture. In (17). Which except for the coda, is exactly the middle of the work, we have a sort of a declaration of the inverse of the subject. This inverse is used in an exchange between the direct theme and its inverse in (22-29). In the sequel they appear sometimes in succession and sometimes together (22, 35, 37). In the Coda at the end (from 35) they sort of compete, and the direct one “wins” in a move of parallel sixths in the two upper voices.



No. 7 in E minor – This sinfonia displays thematic economy and contrapuntal sophistication somewhat like those we have noticed in No. 4 in D minor. It is hard to think of a more condensed economic use of a simple subject. The main subject consists of two motifs – a rising third (upper voice 1) and a descending diminished fifth (2-3). It is repeated in the dominant (middle voice (/3-5) and the lower one (7-9), with an extra entry in the upper voice of 5-6). The lower voice presents a sort of an inverse of the subject between its first and second entries. The theme is expressive of a kind of yearning, but with an assertive and insisting character, which the frequent repetition of the subject (10 times in 6 bars) emphasizes. In (7) a development of the subject begins, with rapid harmonic modulations, reaching dramatic peak on a diminished 7th (37), and a use of rhythmic changes by a succession of 1/12s, all built solely on the materials of the main motif.



No. 8 in F major – This sinfonia is also built on one theme. The theme is vigorous and joyous with a definite rhythmic pattern. It appears in the exposition in the middle, the upper and the lower voices in that order. It consists of two descending thirds: D-C-B \flat and C- B \flat -A. A special feature of this sinfonia is the bi-tonality in the development – at least in its beginning from the middle of (7). The upper voice starts with the theme in C, and the lower one enters immediately in a stretto in F. (b.t.w. one of the four clavier duets is a bi-tonal work and it is also in F.) This stretto continues up to (11), and shorter stretto moves continue to the end of the development in the relative minor (d, 15). The sinfonia contains many other moves of amusing imitation between the voices (4-5, 19-21), which sometimes move together (17-18).



No. 9 in F minor – In a sharp contrast to the previous sinfonia and to the following one, this sinfonia is slow, heavy and full of sadness – the most impressive in this respect in the corpus. It consists of three subjects, all displaying a chromatic move and other interconnecting thematic features, in a dense contrapuntal texture. These are: the main theme in the upper voice (1-3); the chromatic descent in the lower voice there; the rhythmic variation on the main motif in the continuation of the lower voice (3-5), while the middle voice takes the chromatic descent. All three appear in a contrapuntal texture in the exposition. A short episode, built out of these motifs, leads us back to the tonic (7), and the exposition ends at (9) in the relative major, A \flat . There begins a sort of a secondary theme, which is in fact a tense variation of the main theme, but with two important difference: Intervals are stretched – the third of (1) into a triton (which is an inverse of the one in (2)); A syncope E \flat is introduced in the upper voice of (9) and is copied by A \flat in the lower voice, and then a syncope A \flat in the middle voice (10) is copied by D \flat in the

lower voice. This gentle syncopation introduces a slight rhythmic tension in the work. At (15) the voices exchange roles, where the middle voice presents an augmentation of the main theme (quarters instead of eights), an augmentation that passes also to the upper voice (17). A cadence to the dominant (C) leads to an intensification of the development with much wider and more daring intervals, intermingled with the above syncopate – the tensest passage in the work. This move ends on VI (Db, 24) and immediately after that, exchanging voices, on III (Ab), where the 3 motifs return to their original roles in the 3 voices. The main subject, with its 3 motifs returns in a coda in the tonic (31).



No. 10 in G – A rigid rhythm, but flowing in 16th notes characterizes this piece. There is only one theme, built on a scale-like motif (upper voice, 1-2). The three voices take the main theme in order, and here again there is a short episode before the third entry of the theme in the lower one. Due to the scale like rapid move of the main theme one can miss the way Bach uses the ascending fourth (F# – B, 1). But this, direct and inverse, proves important in the entire piece (e.g. the upper and lower voices in (27-31). These fourths are augmented in the upper voices of (22-25).



No.11 in G minor – Again, in sharp contrast to the preceding and the following sinfonias, this is a charming, gentle pastoral siciliano in 3/8. Its main theme of 8 bars consists of a stepwise descending octave with a typical dotted rhythm in the steps that runs throughout the piece. These elements are emphasized in a wide transition passage that leads from the relative major (Bb), through A to D minor (16-31) exactly at the middle of the work. A sort of development leads back to the main theme in the tonic (65) with which the work ends. A tense passage (41-48) exploits the subtle rhythmic syncopation of the transition passage (22-29). One should also note the two “organ points” on A (24-28) and on D (57-63) resolving on the tonic G at the end.



No. 12 in A – A vigorous rhythmic piece in 4/4. The three voices take the main (and only) theme in order (top, middle, low) in the tonic, dominant, tonic accordingly. A transition passage, built out of the ending of the main theme (last half of (2), leads to the dominant (E, 9). An extensive development begins there, taking the opening motif of the theme through various modulations aiming at the relative minor (f#, 14), preceded by a long organ point on its dominant (c#, 12).

The main theme then returns in the tonic (23) in the lower voice, to which the upper voice joins at (24) and the middle one concludes by repeating the main motif of the beginning (27-29).



No. 13 in A minor – This is a solemn piece in 3/8. The subject is a short and simple theme, a sort of *cantus firmus* in the upper voice, with a syncopated ending. The other voices join in order and between the entry of the middle one (5, in the dominant) and the lower (13, in the tonic) there is a short episode of descending scales in 1/16s in the two upper voices. The minor second A-G#A in the bass (1) will prove to be of particular importance in the sequel. In the transition to the relative major (21) the two upper voices play the theme in parallel while the lower one brings in a new motif of a broken chord with an ending, which is built on the minor second of the bass of (1). This gains more importance e.g. in the upper voices of 36-40 to the end.



No. 14 in Bb - This is a particularly dense contrapuntal piece. Two motifs of the main subject are of special importance: the descending fourth of Bb to F, and the emphasis on the rising third (end of (1)). These motifs are repeated and constantly operative in the sinfonia. The play between them is enhanced e.g. in the lower voice of (5) and of (17-21). Here also, as in all the sinfonias, there is an episode before the third entry (lower voice, 4). The order of entries is slightly unusual: middle, upper, lower. The episode is built out of the material of the ending of the first subject (middle voice, the second half 2). At (12) there is a beginning of a dense stretto, and although this is not strictly maintained in the continuation, the play of copies between the voices in (14-16) is not less impressive. At (17) something like a new dense stretto begins - it is not a strict one even in the upper voices, and the lower one deviates even further and underlines the motif of the descending fourth of the second quarter in (1).



No. 15 in B minor – This is a virtuosic sinfonia in 9/16, which ends this wonderful corpus. It is relatively simple in its contrapuntal texture, in its structure and its harmonic moves. It is quite remarkable for the ending sinfonia that in contrast to all other sinfonias, and especially to the preceding one (Bb), its contrapuntal fabric is so much simpler: It is essentially a two-part invention (with few occasional simple harmonic doublings). The subject is of 3 bars and consists of two motifs that built up the whole work: a rising third (B – C# – D) and a rapid ending in 32nds on the notes of the tonic chord. Between the notes of the rising third we have, as if in

parenthesis, a motif of a minor second (F#-G-F#). The accompaniment in the lower voice condenses in 16th notes the rising third and augments the minor second (B – A# - B). So, what is augmented in the upper voice is diminished in the lower one, and what is diminished in the upper is augmented in the lower. A rapid move of the 32nds in both hands leads to the relative major (D, 14) and from there to A (17) and back to B minor (26) and to the conclusion, in which the motif of the rising third is emphasized in all voices, and the work, concluding the whole of this magnificent corpus, humbly ends.



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