

J. S. Bach (arr. Shute): Stretto fugue for solo violin

adapted from BWV 29 and 232

This stretto fugue originated as the second movement (originally in D major, for chorus and orchestra) of the cantata “Wir danken dir, Gott,” BWV 29, composed in 1731 for the inauguration of the new Leipzig town council (*Ratswechsel*). Bach evidently liked this movement, as he later used in the Mass “in B minor” for both the *Gratia agimus tibi* and the *Dona nobis pacem*.

It is scarcely surprising that he held the movement in such high esteem, as it is so exceptional a movement that I might venture to consider it perhaps the single most perfectly constructed movement in the Western canon. It is constructed of only a few essential motivic building blocks, which are not only striking simple but, fascinatingly, not particularly original in themselves: they are old tropes whose contrapuntal potential was long recognized but which Bach here develops with an unprecedented degree with the utmost economy of means while amazingly creating a harmonically varied tapestry with a tonal trajectory that yields a deeply satisfying, even breathtaking, whole.

What is surprising is how well this intensely contrapuntal stretto fugue fits onto the four strings of the violin without exceeding the technical milieu of polyphonic violin playing of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Germany; indeed, its partimento-like subjects make it not unlike the larger but also rather freer and more improvisatory C-major solo violin fugue from BWV 1006.

Dominick Sackmann has postulated that the polyphonic violin playing of Bach’s day grew largely out of an improvised tradition, relatively little of which was notated.¹ There is at least overlap between Bach’s solo violin works and his compositions for other scorings: for example, the G-minor fugue survives in versions for lute (BWV 1000) and organ (BWV 539/II); there is reason to believe the C-major violin fugue may be related to an organ fugue that Bach improvised (or adapted?) on the chorale “An Wasserflüssen Babylon” in 1720, the same year in which the violin solos were completed;² and not only does the E-major partita survive in a transcription for lute (BWV 1006a), Bach also recycled its opening *Preludio* as the opening sinfonia of none other than “Wir danken dir, Gott,” immediately preceding the stretto fugue transcribed in the present edition. Therefore a scenario in which this stretto fugue were adapted for solo violin, whether in notated or unnotated form, does not feel at all out of place to me within the practice of Bach’s day.

As a parenthetical performance note: since the sinfonia that opens BWV 29 is an adaptation of the E-major *Preludio* for solo violin, an interesting performance possibility could be to present the two unaccompanied violin movements back-to-back, with the E-major of the prelude transitioning naturally into the A-major of the stretto fugue.³

¹ Dominick Sackmann, “Warum komponierte Bach BWV 1001–1006?” <https://www.gianotti.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Vortrag-Dominik-Sackmann.pdf>

² see Benjamin Shute, “‘Al riverso’: Resurrection imagery in the C-major Fuga,” ch. 3 in *Sei Solo: Symbolum? The Theology of J. S. Bach’s Solo Violin Works* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick/Wipf & Stock, 2016)

³ To be clear, in Bach’s context formal pairings of preludes and fugues as a single entity always share a key in common, as to do otherwise would be a theoretical absurdity in light of Aristotelian ideals of unity. But in my view this needn’t preclude a juxtaposition of tonally related movements within the more practical and improvisatory medium of live music-making (as indeed Bach’s culture richly juxtaposes the formal and theoretical with the practical, adaptable, and improvisatory).

On the notation

I have preserved the original *alla breve* time signature but elected to show bars with small rather than full bar lines while at the same time opting for an older practice of notating the full value of notes that are syncopated across a bar line (for example, instead of two half notes tied over a bar line, showing a single whole note). The reason that I have done this is because long notes that do and must sustain in theory need not be sustained or rearticulated by the bow in practice, and therefore showing a tie to what in practice is a silent note seemed needlessly confusing. If players simply sound notes that are notated vertically at any given moment (while perhaps reasonably sustaining two-note sonorities where appropriate), the effect will be entirely satisfactory.

Since in spite of this the original measures are preserved (albeit with small bar lines), I have opted for the modern notational practice of accidentals remaining in force for the duration of a measure, since that will be more familiar to today's players and would otherwise result in repeatedly renotating certain accidentals in ways that would feel cluttered to modern eyes.

Benjamin Shute
August 2022

Stretto fugue in A major (after BWV 29 + 232) JS Bach
transc. B Shute

BDS August 2022

