

# J. S. Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue in D minor* (BWV565) revisited

by Mark Argent

In 1981 Peter Williams produced a startling suggestion: that one of the most famous pieces of organ music, the *Toccatà and Fugue in D minor* BWV565, might have originally been written for a solo stringed instrument.<sup>1</sup> Although the idea seemed audacious, his transcription for solo violin, broadcast on Radio 3 and published by Faber Music, made a great deal of musical sense, and has deservedly entered the violin repertoire. But Williams held open the door to the possibility that this piece might originally have been for solo cello, or five string cello. In this article I mean to pursue the third of these options, from the perspective of having played the *Toccatà and Fugue* on a five string baroque cello, and prepared versions for five and for four string cello.<sup>2</sup>

In outline, the things which called into question the usual attributions of this piece are:

1. The earliest surviving manuscript is in the hand of Johann Ringk, who was a pupil of Bach's pupil J. P. Kellner. This is far enough removed from Bach to mean that we can't know whether it is a faithful copy of a work for solo organ, or of a transcription of a string piece, or indeed, by Bach at all.
2. The form and texture of the piece is highly unusual, and in particular, lacks the contrapuntal rigour usually associated with keyboard fugues by Bach. This means that there must be an extra story, whether it is that the piece is not by Bach, or not a 'normal' organ work.
3. Part of the toccata (bars 12–15), and the actual fugue subject itself, alternate a repeating note with a moving one, in a manner reminiscent of the string technique of bariolage, in which a note, usually an open string is played between each note of a melody:



Ex1a: Bars 12–13, (organ)

On the cello the repeating note becomes the open A string, while the moving part is played on the string above (five string cello) or below (four string cello):



Ex1b: Bars 12–13, (5 string cello)



Ex1c: Bars 12–13, (4 string cello)

In the cello transcriptions the first statement of the fugue subject is an octave lower than for the organ (Ex 2) and the repeating note again is an open A string.

4. Normally there is a dynamic interplay between subject and counter subject in a fugue, but here the energy is concentrated in the subject, with the countersubject limply shadowing it in thirds and sixths:



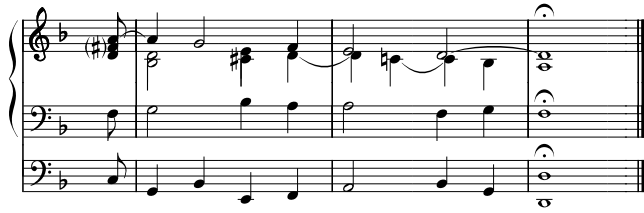
Ex2: Bars 30–34, start of exposition, (organ)

This is what would be expected if, in the original, a fugue had been sketched out by a solo stringed instrument playing each fugal entry in turn without supporting counterpoint (as happens in the prelude to the C minor cello suite), with the countersubject created by a transcriber simply filling in.

5. The massive chords at the end can seem rather simplistic on the organ, and the very final cadence is unusual in two ways: it is a plagal cadence, and ends in a minor chord. On the organ this is strange: why did Bach not use a perfect cadence, and follow the convention of substituting a major chord for the final minor chord?

<sup>1</sup> Early Music (9) 1981, pp 330–337

<sup>2</sup> Published by XXX



Ex3a: Closing bars, (organ)

In string terms, however, these chords become surprisingly effective. The plagal cadence now makes perfect sense, because it allows the use of two open strings in the penultimate chord, and that last chord itself works extremely well as a single note – and therefore neither explicitly major nor minor:



Ex3b: Closing bars, (4 and 5 string cello)

Other theories have also been advanced about the *Tocatta and Fugue* in D minor. Two important ones are that it might represent an exercise in musical rhetoric or that it might be an elaboration of a chorale tune.

There is no doubt that the *Tocatta and Fugue* is highly rhetorical piece, and this surely contributes to its enduring popularity. But it is important to remember rhetoric in this case does not mean the drama obtained by using a large nineteenth-century organ for showy effect, but rather is about speaking (declaiming) through one's instrument.<sup>3</sup>

The suggestion that the the *Tocatta and Fugue* is an elaboration of a chorale tune is also an interesting possibility. The two tunes usually suggested are *Vater unser* and *Wir glauben*. While it is possible that the tune is being alluded to, rather than stated explicitly, neither of these are close enough to the fugue subject to be really compelling:



Ex4a: Fugue subject



Ex4b: *Vater unser*



Ex4c: *Wir glauben*

<sup>3</sup> There is an excellent discussion of rhetorical devices in the toccata in Timothy Albrecht's article "Musical Rhetoric in J. S. Bach's Organ Toccata BWV 265", *Organ Yearbook* 1980, pp84–94.

However, although these two ideas are interesting, and should be thought about by anyone preparing to perform this piece, but they don't shed any light on the original instrumentation: rhetoric is rhetoric whether spoken through an organ or a stringed instrument, and the fugue subject, whether the elaboration of a chorale or not, is the same whatever instrument it is played on.

Before getting too keen on the idea that the *Tocatta and Fugue* was not originally written for organ, it is important to sound some cautionary notes:

1. In the first place, all these things are enough to put a question mark beside the original form, but nothing more: it is entirely possible that Bach (or someone else) was deliberately experimenting with string textures on the organ. To *prove* that the organ version, or a string version, was Bach's original would need primary sources which we do not have. It is also important to bear in mind the number of works by Bach which survive in different instrumentations, each of which is so compelling that it could easily be thought to be the original: this should also make us alert to the possibility that Bach himself may have prepared organ and string versions of the *Tocatta and Fugue*. In any case, a compelling performance of this piece, whether on the organ or another instrument, simply means it was well transcribed and well played, and does not prove what the original was.

2. The fact that an eighteenth-century composer or transcriber should use as many string textures as are found in the *Tocatta and Fugue* in a composition or transcription for solo organ indicates that the instruments were seen as much closer together than would have been the case a century later. If the piece was originally for organ, it could have been a deliberate experiment in string textures on the organ. We know that Bach did this explicitly in transcribing some of the Vivaldi string concerti for organ, and could wonder whether the fugue subject itself, rather than being an example of bariolage, could be an example of alternate toe technique on the organ pedal board.

3. There is a perennial temptation to put a question mark of those works in the Bach corpus which don't seem to fit. Sometimes this is right, but sometimes it simply means that Bach had more imagination and creativity than the musicologist who can't reconcile the piece with their preconceptions.

Having sounded those notes of caution, I remain conscious of how easy it seemed to put the organ version of the *Tocatta and Fugue* on a music stand and convey the essence of the musical argument on a five

string cello. In fact this was suspiciously easy, as if I were undoing someone else's work rather than being especially creative. My first attempt at a "transcription" consisted of nothing more than pencil annotations to the organ score, and, on the basis of the experience of making this transcription I have come to the view that, if this piece was not originally for organ, then the most likely candidate is a five string cello, with its extra (top) string tuned to the D above middle C. The reasons for this suggestion are:

1. The addition of a fifth string to the cello extends the range of notes available on the neck of the instrument before it is necessary to move over the belly of the cello – radically altering the hand position. The opening two bars present a problem when played on a 4 string instrument, in that they need a range of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  octaves, and so the powerful opening starts half way up the top string. On a five string instrument the additional string means that opening can be started half way up the neck, in the most open part of the instrument, making it vastly more powerful:



Ex5: Bars 1–3, (5 string cello)

2. Bars 12–15 work over a pedal open A string. To work best this needs a string above the A string, to hold the moving line (see Ex 1b above)

3. There are various places where the player on a five string instrument ends up over the belly of the instrument in what feels like an episodic flight of fancy (e.g. bars 59–61, 85–86, 90–92, 133–136). In these places contrapuntal rigour resumes when the cellist returns to lower positions over the neck of the *five* string instrument (these sections needed more creative solutions to work on a 4 string instrument). In the following example each of the descending scales is played in the same position, across the top three strings, with the whole hand moving up for the start of each new scale. The cellist only returns to low position in the final scale (end of bar 61), in time for the texture to change at the start of bar 62.



Ex6: Bars 59–62, (5 string cello)

4. The strings of a four string cello are usually tuned in fifths, but scordatura tunings were used in the baroque era, and so tuning in fifths cannot be taken for granted. In the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript for the Bach cello suites, tunings are specified for only the fifth and sixth suites. The fifth suite specifies the tuning of a four string instrument to C-G-D-G and uses scordatura notation which shows this to be an alteration from the usual tuning in fifths. The sixth suite specifies a five string cello, and specifies a tuning to C-G-D-A-E. Surely this implies that the tuning of a five string cello in fifths was not taken for granted, though the fact that this suite is notated as it sounds, rather than using scordatura notation, means that another tuning cannot be assumed to be universal either.

5. Tuning a five string cello to C-G-D-A-D makes difficult-looking passages such as the diminished seventh in bar 3 and bar 16 remarkably easy:



Ex7: Fingering for bar 3 (5 string cello)

If the top string were tuned to E then there would be no finger available to play the top B $\flat$  (unless this chord were played in two parts) because it is a semitone *lower* than the note that would be obtained by barring across from the E. The resolution is also very simple, but only if the top string is a D.



Ex8: Fingering for bar 16 (5 string cello)

Here the demisemiquaver groups and double stops can be played by simply barring across the top two strings, and moving position as shown.

6. The fugue subject itself works remarkably well when the repeating note is an open string. It is surprising that modulations never take the fugue to the point where the subject starts on E above middle C (the dominant of the dominant), but that it frequently appears on the D above middle C, as if Bach were deliberately taking advantage of the presence of an open top D string, and avoiding things that would need an open top E string. This is a significant contrast with the prelude of the sixth cello suite, where Bach confines himself to the bottom four strings until he modulates to the dominant, at which point he turns the modulation by using the open E string with magical effect.

Much of the thought in this article is clearly built on the work of Peter Williams. The point where I disagree with his article is over the suggested date of composition. He suggests that the relatively loose construction and weak counterpoint argues against it being by Bach, and suggests that it may in fact be by a composer of the next generation, amongst whom counterpoint was falling out of fashion. While the earliest surviving copy is late enough to mean this is possible, this does mean that the work had to have been written, and then confused with the work of Bach in a relatively short time period. I am drawn to the opposite conclusion, and find this piece reminiscent of the previous generation in general, and Buxtehude in particular. The key points are:

1. There are a surprising number of “tempo” markings, particularly at the end, which are reminiscent of the way seventeenth-century composers often such markings to indicate a change of feeling rather than an actual change of the basic pulse. Towards the end of the fugue (from bar 14) the section is marked “Presto”, moves in demisemiquavers and so feels very fast, and is followed by “Adagio” (slow notes), “Vivace” (a lively mix of short and very short notes), and “Molto adagio” (slower notes): if that whole passage is played at the same basic crotchet pulse, it does indeed feel like sections with the feeling of “Presto”, “Adagio”, “Vivace” and “Molto adagio”.
2. Buxtehude and his generation frequently use contrapuntal style rather than absolutely rigorous counterpoint in works which are not setting out to be pure counterpoint.
3. The string crossing is a key feature of the *Tocatta and Fugue*, and on the cello, gives the piece much of its energy. This reminds me very strongly of the energetic string crossing in the Op 1 trio sonatas of Buxtehude for Violin, Viola da Gamba and continuo.
4. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the five string cello became less common as the eighteenth century drew on: at the risk of introducing a circular argument, this means that *if* the five string cello is the most likely instrument, then the date is also more likely to be early.

This says nothing about *who* wrote the *Tocatta and Fugue*. On the one hand it suggests that, if the piece is not by Bach, then we should be looking to the generation before rather than the generation after. However, the story of Bach’s prolonged visit to Lübeck to hear Buxtehude play is a clear indication that he held the older musician in high regard, and this raises the serious possibility that in the D minor *Tocatta and Fugue* Bach was deliberately exploring the manner of a musician he clearly respected.

Part of the problem in thinking about this piece is that, in the baroque era, organs and cellos were not so far removed from each other as they later became. As performers, organists and cellists spent a great deal of time playing continuo *together*, sharing material very naturally and learning from each other. Where later generations of organists were to become used to organs with many stops and with playing aids to allow for frequent stop changes for expressive effect, the baroque organist would have played extended sections of the *Tocatta and Fugue* on fixed stop combinations, and created expression and the illusion of dynamic contrast by skillful use of articulation. In this respect baroque organists and cellists would have approached the piece in similar ways, because the baroque cello also has limited dynamic range, and relies on skillful articulation (by means of bowing) to extend its apparent dynamic range and create added expressive effect.

We can’t *know* for which instrument this piece was originally composed. Even if we assume that it was originally for a five string cello and transcribed for organ, we can’t get away from the fact that, as Ringk died in 1778, this transcription, and its attribution to Bach, were made (at the very latest) within 28 years of his death, and this clearly means that people steeped in eighteenth-century performance practice felt it appropriate to play this piece on the organ. That organ version is the only source we have about the way in which the *Tocatta and Fugue* was played. This in turn means that cellists learning the piece, whether they think of themselves as playing a reconstruction of a lost original or playing a transcription, need to approach this by thinking about Bach’s organ music, and applying the lessons from there to the *Tocatta and Fugue*, and in turn to take those lessons to the cello suites, rather than start with the cello suites.

This was my starting point in making the cello version. I began by playing from the organ part, and gradually found a stable transcription emerging, which I then explored with other cellists (notably Jane Francis) and organists. Once the version for five string cello was reasonably stable, I set about adapting it for four string cello to make it available to more cellists, though this inevitably involves a greater measure of compromise. In the absence of firm evidence which would *prove* that the *Tocatta and Fugue* was originally for solo cello and tell us about that original, it seemed sensible to treat the creation of cello versions as a process of transcription rather than as one of reconstruction. My aim was to create something close to what an eighteenth-century musician might have done in making a similar transcription: along the way I may have come close to the original form.

The big issue in making the transcription was how to imply harmonic and contrapuntal textures on what is usually considered to be a melodic instrument. One clue was provided by Bach himself in his C minor cello suite, which begins with (effectively) a prelude and fugue for solo cello. The other starting point was my experience of using the five string cello as a harmonic continuo instrument, supplying something of a figured bass realisation in addition to playing a bass line, where I find that surprisingly few extra notes are needed to imply quite a full harmony.

The C minor cello suite has the top two strings a perfect fourth apart – as I propose for the five string cello version of the *Tocatta and Fugue*. The slow section which begins the first movement, like the *toccata*, does not give the impression of counterpoint, but does imply very rich harmony. The large chords create a strong sense of harmonic rootedness, with double stops and single notes working with the natural resonance of the instrument to create a full harmonic texture:



Ex9: Start of C minor suite (as it sounds)



Ex10: bars 2–3 (5 string cello)

In both pieces a fugue follows without a break and the fugue is created by stating the subject at the tonic and the fifth, with little in the way of a countersubject:



Ex11: Start of exposition C minor suite (as it sounds)



Ex12: Start of exposition D minor Fugue

The musical argument which follows in both cases is in near-continuous semiquavers where the harmonic implications are made clear by appropriate double

stops, so that the resonance of the instrument creates most of the harmony:



Ex13: bars 41–42 C minor suite (as it sounds)

Compare this with a more extended section of the cello version of the *Tocatta and Fugue*:



Ex14: bars 115–119 (5 string cello)

in passing I note that in the first two bars of this passage it is necessary to finger the repeating D, but from bar 117 this becomes an open string, stopped immediately by the F# in bar 117 and then ringing through in bars 118 and 119 as the harmonic tension increases, which creates an inevitable crescendo. This works because the pedal point is an open string: I wonder whether this is entirely coincidence.

It is not possible to prove beyond reasonable doubt what instrument the D minor *Tocatta and Fugue* was originally written for. The transcription for five string cello works so well that we are either looking at strong coincidence, or the original instrument. However, the fact that the earliest surviving copy is for organ, and is by a pupil of a pupil of Bach does give this version credibility: even if that credibility is only that someone close to Bach thought this piece appropriate to play on the organ. In any case, whether as a transcription or a reconstruction, the *Tocatta and Fugue* is a welcome addition to the repertoire for the five string cello.