

## **Johann Sebastian Bach's clavichord technique described by Griepenkerl**

Miklos Spanyi, Liminka, FIN

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When considering what I should publish in Clavichord International in the Bach-year 2000, I came to the conclusion that there was no more important task than to make the following source accessible to all clavichord players who do not yet know it.

Friedrich Conrad Griepenkerl was born in 1782. He studied philosophy and pedagogy, and was active during his whole life as a teacher of philosophy and mathematics as well as German language and literature. He also played organ and keyboard instruments, but his name has been immortalized through the publication of Bach's organ works for Peters, the first volume of which is dated September 1844. This justly famed and carefully made critical edition has been used by generations of organists all over the world. However, it is less known that earlier, in 1819, Griepenkerl published Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue as a separate edition. In the preface to this edition, Griepenkerl gives a detailed description of the keyboard technique carefully preserved by the 'Bach-Schule, i.e. Johann Sebastian Bach's sons and pupils, as well as their pupils--the 'grandchildren of J.S.Bach. The preface claims to be a true and authentic description of the keyboard (especially clavichord) technique which J.S.Bach used and taught. In fact Griepenkerl, was also a 'grandchild of J.S.Bach, via Wilhelm Friedemann Bach and Forkel.(1) Forkel was in contact with Wilhelm Friedemann and must have had lessons with him. According to Griepenkerl, Forkel learned the 'Bach-touch from W.F.Bach. In turn, Griepenkerl inherited it from Forkel, from whom he received lessons. Accordingly, the aim of Griepenkerl's publication of the Chromatic Fantasy was to present the work as he had heard Forkel play it.

If we accept that Griepenkerl's preface contains genuine and original information (and, as we shall see, there are many reasons to believe this), it would not be an exaggeration to assume that not only is it the most important source available dealing with Bach's clavichord technique and the manner in which he taught it, it could also be the most important source of any time about clavichord playing! I am fully ready to accept this last assumption. The next thing to accept is that Griepenkerl is speaking about Bach's 'clavichord technique.

A careful reading of the text reveals that the technique described by Griepenkerl has the most relevance on the clavichord, although it is applicable to other keyboard instruments as well. Griepenkerl's careful and detailed description enables anyone to rather easily learn the technique he speaks about, and those who have tried it can best judge its efficacy on the clavichord. If it works (and I may say it does!), we have one more reason (and this reason is weighty) to accept the truth of Forkels words about the clavichord being Bach's favorite keyboard instrument! Griepenkerl's text thus makes all of Forkels writings about Bach much more trustworthy than generally assumed.<sup>(2)</sup> Furthermore, Griepenkerl's text is completely in accordance with Forkels description of Bach's technique in his Bach biography.

Despite of its extreme importance and the fact that it has been published in modern edition at least three times,<sup>(3)</sup> Griepenkerl's text is not very well known among keyboard players. Even organists are seldom informed about the 'Bach-touch, although in the first volume of his edition of Bach's organ works, Griepenkerl repeats the description of Bach's technique in a concise version, referring to the preface in his edition of the Chromatic Fantasia as well as to Forkels biography. With the publication of this English translation I hope to give all keyboard players an opportunity to become acquainted with this crucial source.

Griepenkerl not only describes Bach's touch, he also offers a method to acquire it in practice. How often we have read Forkels words about the origin of the Inventions: that Bach first gave finger exercises to his pupils, requiring them to practice them as long as several months, but at the same time, to make the studies more appealing, he formed little compositions from them. Griepenkerl's text is the only source that really explains what Bach's exercises actually were. It is also to Griepenkerl's credit that he gives further clues to studying the 'Bach-touch, by listing the compositions which are advisable to study in conjunction with the exercises. This 'manual reveals a deep understanding of keyboard pedagogy. It assures such rapid progress that I think it is a further sign of its connection to the authentic tradition of the 'Bach-Schule. Who else could have given such a clear and intensive means of acquiring the technique necessary for Bach's music than the composer himself?

Can we really acquire 'Bach's touch by studying this text? Griepenkerl's method gives us at least the possibility of getting a few steps closer to it. A clavichordist who tries out Griepenkerl's instructions with the exercises can achieve a technique which assures a very 'safe and reliable touch,

resulting in a beautiful and robust sound. In my opinion, many subtle personal varieties of this technique are possible, since hands differ, just as they did at Bach's time. The number of players of the 'Bach-Schule' who really made themselves master of Bach's touch is unknown; but Bach's immense influence on keyboard technique in Germany in the 18th century is undeniable. It is an astonishing fact that the most prominent representatives of the German clavichord in the second half of the 18th century were all in one way or other related to the 'Bach-Schule', or at least to the musical environment and heritage of the Saxony-Thüringen area. Undoubtedly, the touch developed and taught by J.S.Bach resulted in a great number of players who mastered the clavichord, and, being able to use all its subtleties, praised it. Bach was the 'father of the development of clavichord playing (and probably also of clavichord building) in Central Germany(4).

Bach's touch was apparently so radically different from contemporary practices that it seems likely that the oral tradition that Bach was the 'father of modern keyboard technique' is at least partially true. Griepenkerl's text is published here with only a few necessary comments. It is written so that it reveals its true contents only through careful study. Re-reading it from time to time will always reveal more information. Thoughtful analysis of its passages is advisable, and experimenting on a good clavichord is indispensable.

The enclosed facsimile of Griepenkerl's edition of the Chromatic Fantasia reveals much about the performance practice of the Bach tradition. Some of Griepenkerl's comments on the work, and particularly on its performance, are very interesting. Nevertheless, consulting a reliable modern edition is recommended before playing the work from Griepenkerl's edition. Especially in the Fantasia, Griepenkerl's aim was not to present a 'correct text based on the sources' but to give a picture of the 'true performance of the work as he had heard Forkel play it. Therefore, this edition can only be used as a document of performance practice, not as an 'Urtext'. The fugue..which will not be included in the enclosure..contains practically no suggestions of performance. It also deviates in some minor details from the original and from what today we would call a 'musicologically correct' edition.

## **Some remarks about the performance of the Chromatic Fantasia**

The Bach school demands accuracy, ease and freedom of the performance of even the most difficult of its works to a degree which can be attained only through its characteristic manner of touch. This manner of touch was described by Forkel in the small work 'Ueber J S Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke' in such a true and clear manner that several sensible men who were serious about the matter and who through no restricting prejudice had allowed themselves to be incorrectly guided, afterwards learnt it perfectly without example and oral reprimand. The gist of this work is as follows:

The mechanism of the hand is intended for gripping. (das Fassen). On gripping, all fingers with the thumb bend towards the inside of the hand, and express within this movement all the strength and steadiness which may be present. Every other kind of finger movement is either unnatural or leaves a large part of the muscles involved unused, as, for example, the depressing of the finger without a simultaneous bending of it. Each operation of the hand in this movement must therefore succeed with ease, freedom and certainty through being attuned to its natural purpose.

The mechanism of the hand just described is used to its fullest in the striking of keys on keyboard instruments. The two rows of the upper and lower keys lie in two even surfaces beside and over one another, every key in each row having the same length and width; the fingers however are of unequal length. Already this fact makes it necessary to bend the fingers to the point where they all lie with the tips on an even surface and equidistant from one another in a fairly straight line. A completely straight line under the finger tips can only be forced onto most hands, and a slight bending is in fact useful, since, with the exception of the thumbs, the weaker fingers are also the shorter ones, and by dint of the mechanism of most keyboard instruments, the keys at the front at the outer end can be struck with the slightest application of effort, those further up requiring an ever increasing application. On the contrary, it will be very beneficial to the intended movement if the hand in that position is turned so far inwards until each finger strikes vertically (senkrecht), also if the joints which connect the fingers to the hand never sink but always form a straight line with the wrist, under arm and elbow.

However the inequality of the fingers in strength and suppleness makes a different artificial assistance necessary, without which nobody, even with the greatest efforts and persistent diligence, can succeed in conquering the natural obstacle lying in the weakness of the fourth and fifth fingers. J.S.Bach found this assistance in the use of the weight of the hand and arm, which everyone can either maintain at the same strength, or increase and lessen with no trouble at all just as they wish. No finger is too weak to act as a support for this weight, the fourth and fifth fingers can carry it at the same strength as the second and third and transfer it to the keys at the same level; in this respect the resilience inherent in every finger is brought into use. The most profound connection of this resilience with the weight of the hand on striking the key is what is most essential in the whole mechanism of keyboard playing in Bach's art. It is accomplished in the following manner:

A finger may be placed upon a key to serve the finely measured weight of the arm as a support, not stiff and rigid, but with a constant intention to draw it in, so that it would immediately spring back into the hand, if for the moment the weight of the hand, for this purpose relatively increased, did not hinder it, or also vice-versa if the strength used in the drawing in of the fingers against the pressure of the arm was not too weak. This position is impossible without the wrist of the hand remaining immovable and being held at the same height as the knuckles on the upper surface of the hand, which have a considerably higher position than the middle knuckles of the finger. The correct position is recognised by the elongated and almost upright holding of the little finger and the angled position of the thumb on the keys. But also there is no other joint involved in this expression of strength; the elbow joint is loose, and those fingers which are not striking the keys hover calm and ready approximately a quarter of an inch away over the nearest keys. If the distance is much greater, the required calm is lacking, and is replaced by a harmful and unnecessary tension. If next to the first finger one is now to strike a second, no matter which, so must this intention first be consciously brought under control, and the finger placed in position to be able to support as with the first. Therefore, before it strikes the key, it will already be hovering with a certain tension over the key which it is to touch. Then the supporting strength which the first finger has previously performed as described must be transferred with the greatest speed to the second, which is accomplished in no other way than that the first is drawn in with resilience and the second springs onto the key with the same weight. In so far as the described action is carried out with speed, accuracy and delicacy, a note struck in such a

way will certainly sound without any difficulty as if it had arisen free and physically unencumbered (*geistig*) from the air. This latter however is the real purpose and makes up no small part of the player's virtuosity - he who now wishes to accomplish what has just been described with every finger of each hand in that connection, nearer as well as further away, and in all the various possible changes of strengths and weaknesses, quicker and slower, of pushing and slurring,- with delicacy and certainty and without further physical exertion, he has the touch of J.S.Bach, as Forkel had it, and as many have learnt from him.

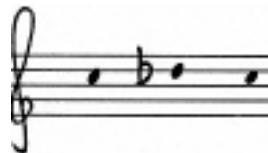
Beginners, as well as more accomplished players, can start to practise the action to its best effect as follows.

So that in the beginning the weight of the lower arm can function without intentional pressure and relief, the joint at the elbow must be completely slack and relaxed. In such a manner one practises with each hand any two adjacent notes



**Ex.1**

and



**Ex.2**

and



**Ex.3**

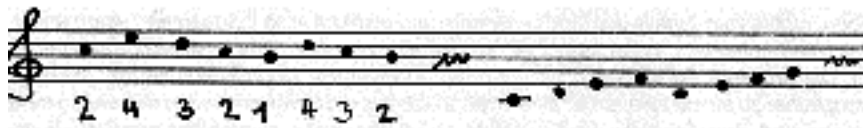
with the second and third finger for as long as required until it can be done slowly and quickly. Then the thumb with the second finger, the third with the fourth and the fourth with the fifth finger tackle the same

exercise, without changing the position of the hand and without the thumb and little fingers shying away from the short upper keys. Hereupon one adds the fourth finger to the second and third and practises ascending and descending passages like the following



Ex.4

slowly at first, then gradually faster, as soon as it can be done without exertion. In this way in addition to the thumbs the second and third - and the third, fourth and fifth fingers can be exercised, until one can no longer discern any difference in the touch of the various fingers, and all sound totally equal and independent. Now follow figures in which four fingers are required,



Ex.5

starting with the thumb, second, third and fourth, then with the second, third, fourth and fifth fingers; after that figures for all five fingers



Ex.6

with the transpositions as found in almost every keyboard school. The touch of the shorter upper keys requires special practice, for which one can make use of the following figures:



Ex.7

finally all scales and arpeggios. The left hand does the same exercises with the corresponding fingers, firstly alone, then together with the right hand

If the thumb is not used, and just the four fingers are being practised, it should never hang under the keys, but on the contrary it should hover over the keys, ready to attack. Still less, when the thumb, second and third fingers are being practised, should the fourth and fifth fingers stick up into the air or be tucked into the hand; under such circumstances they as well should hover calmly over the keys at the appropriate distance.

After the exercises described here have been worked through with the natural weight of the lower arm and with a completely relaxed joint at the elbow, one can add strengthening and lightening of this weight through pressing or raising, by dint of the joint at the elbow. At first completely equally, and finally with gradual increasing and lessening for each subsequent note, with the result that one has the forte and piano, the growing and fading away of the strength under one's control all without further exertion, especially the forte without striking the fingers.

This complete preparation, with appropriate application, enthusiasm and talent, can and should take the beginner no more than two months. Afterwards, however, pieces for practice by J.S.Bach himself must be chosen, since few other composers allocate a melodic line to the left hand. The most suitable are the 2-part Inventions numbers 1 and 6; then numbers 12, 11 and 5. Also the runs in thirty-second notes in the chromatic Fantasia, and others of the same kind should be fitted in. However one should look carefully through each piece that one wishes to practise, one should consider well the best fingering, which is always the most comfortable, and not leave anything to chance, and then begin at such a slow tempo that one is sure of being able to go through the whole piece for the very first time without difficulty. Greater speed comes automatically from continued practice. Also one ought not to hurry to a second piece until the difficulties of the first have been completely mastered. Whoever fails to follow this instruction will without doubt become used to stumbling, will double the learning time, and never learn to play with freedom, certainty and self-confidence. Moreover, to begin with, the Klavier is better by far than the Forte-Piano, since one hears every error of touch more easily, and more depends upon the player than on the instrument. Transition to the Forte-Piano has no difficulties,



since the touch remains the same, and the Forte-Piano allows only greater carelessness without causing significant alterations in the treatment. Whoever holds a different opinion has probably not mastered the Klavier, like all mere Forte-Pianists.

If however one is completely serious about his musical training, and considers the most thorough knowledge of all of the keyboard compositions of J.S.Bach as indispensable, then he must decide to work through all of this master's pieces for beginners before he dares to tackle the greater works. In the category of pieces for beginners belong above all the six little preludes for beginners, the fifteen 2-part Inventions, and the fifteen 3-part Symphonies, in the order as listed here. Whosoever has mastered all thirty- six of these pieces at the same time, may consider himself a good keyboard player, and from the older and the newer keyboard music there will be few pieces too difficult for him. Only the four and five-part fugues of J.S.Bach still require a special preparation, which can be achieved through a diligent and delicate playing of his four-part Chorales.

Up to this point, this should suffice. Here however, we should talk of Bach's own touch, since it is indispensable to the most delicate playing, and without it, the chromatic Phantasie and fugue in particular could not be performed with the proper accuracy.

The touch is, however, only to be compared to pronunciation. There is more to a beautiful musical declamation than mere clarity, accuracy, security and ease with complete control over the whole mechanism of playing. The majority of J.S.Bach's musical compositions are pure works of art for all time; on account of which they must be treated objectively. Any sentimentality and affectedness is banned from their performance, as is everything which is fashionable, subjective and individual.

Whosoever wishes to draw them in to his circle of sensitivity or feelings - and manner of expression of the present or of any determined time without possessing the receptivity and training to allow his mind to be clearly decided by the work of art itself - he would exactly in that way distort and spoil them without fail. Purely objective artistic representation is however the hardest of all, and is accomplished and understood only by a few. The lack of the same gives rise so often to false pretension instead of modest understanding and pure joy through being completely lost in beautiful works of art. All this is true particularly of the Chromatic Phantasie. With it every new keyboard player has ample reason to mistrust his feelings, and just to get onto the

track of its true performance he must tolerate some advice corresponding to the traditions indicated on the titlepage.

These traditions are to be repeated faithfully here, in so far as that is possible with words and signs, and as far as our inadequacy will permit it. However, to spare lots of words, everyone who wishes to use what is given here wisely is advised to compare the present edition with the previous one note by note and to regard the variants found here not as presumptuous improvements but as indications of the genuine performance handed down in an unbroken line.

The first two pages of the Phantasie and the third up to the arpeggios must be played as brilliantly and lightly as possible in a steady and very rapid tempo, with clarity but without a running together of the notes, with increasing and diminishing strength according to the unmistakable harmonic sense. Only the transition to the first arpeggio through the D minor chord broken into triplets should start slowly and gradually become faster until one reaches the tempo at which one wishes to take the arpeggio. The same holds good for the passages between the other arpeggios.

According to C.Ph.E.Bach's work , *Der wahre Art, das Klavier zu spielen*, the chords indicated as white-note arpeggios should themselves be played broken twice up and down, the fingers remaining on the keys which have been struck. Here however, it seems better if one strikes the chords only once up and down, and breaks the concluding chord of each arpeggio only once upwards. That the fingers remain on the keys ought to be indicated by the addition of the word *legato*. A steady, delicate touch, increase and decrease of speed and strength in almost imperceptible gradations according to the clear sense of the harmony, and above all the gentlest connection of the chords goes without saying. With the latter, the transition leads mainly from the penultimate note, reckoned from the bass up of the previous chord, to the first note of the following; however it is not always necessary. Whosoever studies these arpeggios without preconceived ideas (*Vorurtheil und Leichtsin*n) will surely find all this and even more than can be indicated by words. The crotchets inserted between the minims could on first glance confuse many people; however the only reasonable observation will remove all difficulties: that here no attention is to be paid to the barlines, and that the crotchets are only a shorthand expression instead of the chord being written out again with the one altered note.

It is assumed that the recitative will be performed in an appropriate manner. However the shorter-value notes as indicated here could tempt one to a quicker tempo; for that reason it must be added that these notevalues were chosen only so that the bars would add up to the correct values. The external visible rhythm is here very different from the internal rhythm of the thoughts, and it can be that short value notes must be played as slowly or even more slowly than adjacent notes of longer values, as for instance the hemidemisemiquavers at the end of the first recitative. The first note of each of the recitative passages is shown as shortened, not so as to tempt one to a dotted and strained performance, but only to show that each passage begins on the upbeat, and that therefore the second note is the one where the accent falls. The single chords which separate and connect the recitative passages must be broken from the bass upwards with a steady touch, now stronger, now weaker, now quicker, now slower as the sense demands. The rest may be revealed to the seriously searching artistic sense by the almost overloaded indications.

The organ point, which from the words *senza misura* leads to the conclusion, will take the freest performance, and almost arbitrary ornamentation which however only a player who is completely steeped in the art and manner of similar performances may risk. J.S.Bach himself has indicated such ornaments through individual figures, between the chords. In smaller notevalues one finds the manner in which from time to time Forkel played and learned. In both ways the margins of the suitable free ornamentation can be lessened. For the 'weaksighted' it must also be remarked that the main thoughts of this concluding passage are not these interludes but the quavers which descend by semitones over the chords. Every interlude must therefore lean towards them, and not be considered as something complete by itself. Finally the concluding chord must be broken from the top downwards, increasingly slowly.

In the fugue it has been necessary to make only a few amendments and markings. The tempo is fixed as in the manner of the newer keyboard music, a few misprints have been improved and several difficulties which exist simply in the previous style have been made easier through other markings. Whosoever wishes to learn to play the piece with skill, freedom and accuracy should accustom himself to the manner of fingering learned by C.Ph.E. Bach from his father, according to which the best fingers are those with which the passage can be executed most comfortably. One should place the thumb and little finger as often as it

is useful and necessary on the shorter upper keys, one should put each shorter finger under the longer, and each longer finger over the shorter, in spite of the one-sided rules of many of the newer theorists. J.S.Bach wrote pieces for practicing such fingerings, such as the fifth of the two-part inventions, which accustoms the thumb and little finger to the upper keys. Moreover, only a very small number of Bach's greater keyboard pieces can be performed well and easily without this fingering.

Finally it remains to be wished that nobody take offence at this description of the manner of performance of one of the finest works of art to have flowed from a German mind. Whosoever finds half-measures, omissions and mistakes let him censure them honestly and strongly, yet not without love and warmth for the unique work of art. One needs a genuine explanation of such matters, and on our side it will be accepted with heartfelt thanks.

Braunschweig, 10th of April 1819.  
F. Griepenkerl.

#### NOTES

(1) Johann Nikolaus Forkel, born in 1749, was a music historian, theorist, composer, keyboard player, and ardent protector of the clavichord. His most famous publication is the very first Bach biography, 'Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke, published in Leipzig in 1802.

(2) The reliability of Forkel's statement that the clavichord was Bach's favourite keyboard instrument has been questioned many times, but there is little reason to assume (as has often happened) that W.Fr. and C.P.E. Bach (from whom Forkel collected his information) gave a false picture of their father. Both great sons of J.S. Bach adored their father and everything he had achieved. The legend that Bach's sons refused their fathers musical inheritance and obstinately adopted new techniques and styles is an invention of the romantic period, which wanted to picture J.S. Bach as the misunderstood genius, opposed even by his own sons. This led later harpsichordists to question Forkel's statements, and to deny the importance of the clavichord in Bach's music without even attempting to perform it on clavichord (Sorry, my harpsichordist colleagues).

(3) Ewald Kooiman: Bachs Klaviertechnik, in: Het orgel 79, 1983 (No.1); Ewald Kooiman: Eine Quelle zu Bachs Klaviertechnik, in: Ars Organi, 31. Jahrgang, Heft 1, March 1983; and Quentin Faulkner, Griepenkerl on J.S. Bach's Keyboard - A Translation and Commentary, in: The American

Organist, Vol.22, no 1, January 1988, pp.63-65.

(4)The 'Bach-touch' is less evident on the small, fretted clavichords of the 17th and early 18th centuries than on the rather heavily strung, large unfretted models. Bach's new approach to playing technique was apparently an appropriate reaction to the changes in clavichord building in the 1720-30s, perhaps at the same time giving new impulse to it.

(5)This results in a relatively high position of the wrist. The use of arm weight is the most essential point in Bach's technique. It is useful to try first this mechanism sitting in a 'unnaturally high position. or even standing at the instrument. When you have achieved the feel of arm weight, you can sit down and gradually lower the seat, until you have achieved the hand and arm position required by the text--using, however, the arm weight in the same manner!

(6)The nice, strong sound resulting from this touch is due to the very firm contact of tangent and string. The continuous use of arm weight assures the same tone from attack to release. This also influences sound quality and eliminates unnecessary changes (raises) of pitch.

(7)i.e. broken chords up and down, probably similarly to the manner in which modern pianists practice them.

(8)All of Bach's exercises seem to be very simple, but their effect is amazing. They guide the beginner in learning the 'Bach-touch', but they can also be used effectively by advanced players, as warming-up exercises in daily use or before a concert.

(9)It is quite astonishing how many of the two-part Inventions contain motivic elements closely related to the exercises described above. This also justifies Forkels remark that Bach formed the Inventions from the finger exercises.

(10)i.e. the clavichord.

(11)Anyone arguing that Griepenkerl's text merely reflects a romantic view on performing Bach's music rather than the tradition of the 'Bach-Schule', should reconsider his/her opinion in the light of these sentences.