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(Re)Creating Bach's Weimar Organ Fugues: Model-Learning, Externalization, and Conceptual Combination in Musical Creativity

ABSTRACT

Background

Though never explicitly presented as studies in musical creativity, schema and partimento research have tacitly advanced a theory of the creative process in the long eighteenth century, one centered on the close imitation of models or schemata. Because every composer of the period presumably worked with the same models, these areas have opened a lacuna in our understanding of musical creativity — namely, how composers as aesthetically and stylistically diverse as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were cut from the same schematic cloth as a Vivaldi, Porpora, or Boccherini.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper examines the problem by theorizing the relationship of models to creativity, following research in creative cognition. Bach's Weimar organ fugues in D, G, and A minor (BWV 538, 542 and 543) serve as case studies, whereby music analysis becomes a means of (re)enacting the creative compositional act.

The investigation pivots on two key themes in creativity studies: 1) schemata are not internalized in the same way by all members of a culture (Vygotsky 1978), but rather are already learned in a creative manner, which subsequently leads to their original use and appropriation; 2) original contributions in a given domain rely not on the mere imitation of models, but rather on deep-level analogies among them, which allows for *conceptual combination* or *conceptual blending*.

Methods

Creative cognition research is combined with historically contextualized analysis of musical scores and pedagogical documents.

Implications

The three Weimar fugues reflect a unique conceptualization of the descending fifths or *Quintfall* sequence that is also seen in the partimenti of Bach's thoroughbass treatise (1738), titled *Grundsätze zum Enquatre spielen* (Principles for Playing in Four Parts). Bach's pedagogical presentation differs substantially from that of his Italian contemporaries, who introduce the several variations of the *Quintfall* as distinct bass movement patterns or *movimenti* (for example, the down-a-third, up-a-step). Bach's organization is abstract and conceptual in nature, organized according to the harmonic and voice-leading commonalities among *Quintfall* variants (Byros 2015), which reveal or are predicated on the quadruple invertibility of the sequence. The same German-Italian difference is seen in Bach's handling of the *Quintfall* sequence in the Weimar organ

fugues, when compared with the Vivaldi concertos which he transcribed for organ. The fugue subject from BWV 538, for example, shares the *Quintfall* sequence and scale-degree profile of the subject from Vivaldi's concerto in the same key, BWV 596. Bach's treatment differs dramatically, however, in its systematic demonstration of the quadruple invertibility of the sequence. Bach's fugue can be read as a kind of revision of his Italian model, in 'correcting' Vivaldi's ad hoc reharmonizations of the subject, which change its harmonic content and identity. Among other things, the Weimar organ fugues are exercises in or studies of the inversional relationships among fifth sequence variants, as well as of their combinations. More broadly, the differences between Vivaldi's treatment of the *Quintfall* and the *Vielstimmigkeit*, *Vollstimmigkeit*, and *Stimmtausch* seen in Bach's unique 'externalization' of the model brings evidence of the fluidity of cultural artifacts, or schemas, suggested by Vygotsky's model of creativity (1978). Because of the internalization-externalization creativity cycle (Moran and John-Steiner 2003), a model or schema is always something of a moving target.

Bach's particular *dispositio* of contrapuntal complexes is, furthermore, predicated on deep-level analogies between different genres: the Bach organ fugue style is the result of a *conceptual blending* of North German organ fugues and Italian concerti, and the deep-level analogical structures underlying both genres, which Bach presumably learned when transcribing Vivaldi for organ. Roughly 50 % of the fugue from BWV 543, for instance, consists of variants of the *Quintfall* schema. The directionality of the model on the local level is combined with a forward-driving formal organization that is adapted from the concerto style, resulting in a genuine concerto-fugue hybrid that is distinct from Vivaldi's use of fugue in a concerto as a single movement. There are fugues in Vivaldi's concertos, but no concerto in his fugues. Meanwhile, Bach's concerto-izing of fugal form is seen in his construction of a complex hierarchy of the sentence phrase-structure, or what Wilhelm Fischer (1915) called the *Fortspinnungstypus*, coupled with the tutti-episode design of ritornello form. This creates a sense of continuous forward drive and a compelling large-scale rhetoric.

The conceptual combination or bisociation evident in Bach's creative process is among the features now associated with 'Big-C creativity', or eminent contributions in some domain (Ward and Kolomyts 2010), and they align with conceptions of genius from Bach's day. The Scottish philosopher Alexander Gerard (1759) wrote that 'the first and leading quality of genius is *invention*, which consists [...] in [the] readiness of association [of] the remotest ideas that are any way related. [...] Thus genius is the grand architect which not only chuses the materials, but disposes them into a regular structure' according to 'vigorous uniting principles'. The idea of crea-

tively ‘choosing’ and ‘disposing’ an idea strongly aligns with Bach’s treatment of the *Quintfall* in the Weimar fugues. Together, Bach’s *vielstimmig* ‘externalization’ of thoroughbass models and their concerto-analogue disposition are features that contribute to the powerful rhetorical qualities of his music, which C. P. E. Bach described as his father’s ‘hidden secrets of *Harmonie*’ (David and Mendel 1998).

Keywords

Schema, Partimento, Creativity, Composition, J. S. Bach, Vivaldi, Historically Informed Theory/Analysis.

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