

Crafting your student tone quality: articulation, voicing and listening considerations in the Prelude and Fugue BWV 875 by Johann Sebastian Bach

Creando la calidad del sonido de tu estudiante: consideraciones de articulación, conducción armónica y comprensión auditiva en el Preludio y fuga BW 875 de Johann Sebastian Bach

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Abstract

Facing a new musical work demands a deep reflection about technique, ear training, and musical style. Also, as Music teachers, it is important to have the tools to explain the concept of tone quality to our students. This paper proposes a case study of articulation, voicing, and listening considerations in the Prelude and Fugue BWV 875 by Johann Sebastian Bach. A literature review, as well as actual playing, was conducted, and documented to establish practical guidelines. Also, some practice tools are suggested. This work can be used by both teachers and students as an illustration of how a musical work can be explored.

Keywords: tone quality; voicing; articulation; practice tools; prelude and fugue BWV 875

Resumen

Enfrentarse a un nuevo trabajo musical exige una profunda reflexión sobre la técnica, el entrenamiento del oído y el estilo musical. Además, como profesores de música, es importante contar con las herramientas para explicar el concepto de calidad del sonido a nuestros alumnos. Este artículo propone un caso de estudio de consideraciones de articulación, conducción armónica y comprensión auditiva en el Preludio y Fuga BW 875 de Johann Sebastian Bach. Una revisión de la literatura y una ejecución de la obra fueron revisadas y documentadas para establecer pautas prácticas. Además, se sugieren algunas herramientas de estudio. Este trabajo puede ser utilizado por maestros y estudiantes como una ilustración para explorar una obra musical.

Palabras clave: calidad de tono; *voicing*; articulación; herramientas de práctica; preludio y fuga BWV 875

I. Introduction

As professional pianists, music has been part of our lives for many years. When a new musical work comes into our hands, we meticulously set about learning it. First at all, we plan carefully how we are going to approach the study of that new piece, and keep the end goal in mind to play music that speaks, says something, and expresses something; our music always needs to be meaningful. The performance should not merely be a collection of notes. This process involves many musical, and

physical aspects that deserve reflection, and deep thought, in order to make the smartest musical decisions. Those decisions include the exploration of the best fingering, the right tempo, the finest balance, coordination, and interpretation. If we become more fully aware of the decisions we make in our playing, we will be more likely to help our students find answers to similar questions in their music.

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Throughout the learning process, experimentation plays an important role. Therefore, as piano teachers we need to understand deeply how to achieve what is considered to be beautiful playing, and moreover how to explain it to our students. Also, we must know that piano playing requires beautiful tone which is not only the medium of musical expression but also the means through which we give voice to our musical thoughts. It is impossible to imagine beauty of expression without beauty of tone. As piano teachers, we need to experiment with, and explore how tone color is shaped and can be transformed. It requires us to consider the changes of quality that are possible on our instrument, and to what level these may be employed in our playing (Abravanel, 1999). For this specific reason, we have to know how to manipulate the keys in order to play every possible kind of tone. The resulting knowledge will lead us to discover the most successful ways to bring the fingers into contact with the key, and how in the end, this touch will be directed to the artistic interpretation of a musical work. It is true that tone control is a complex issue involving various factors that can change the nature of the sound; but the exploration of them is fascinating, and having control over tone is a fundamental part of our music making.

Exploring how tone is produced

In the basic understanding of how tone is produced, we know that it is created by the stroke of the hammer against its string or rather, its three strings. This keystroke is mainly composed of three components: the down stroke, the hold, and the lift. The down stroke is what initially generates the sound, and our fingers should be able to create the keystroke that we desire (Chang, 2007). However, tone is also physically produced through a balance of three elements: weight, pressure and muscular energy. None of these means anything if dissociated from the others. We might think of weight as a continuous, but passive, flow of power from the shoulders down into the fingers. It will remain passive until it is propelled by pressure,

into actual force. On the other hand, pressure is muscular energy, and this muscular energy serves two purposes. One is to maintain the position of the hand, by preventing the arms from lying inert at the sides, of lifting the fingers, and of preventing the wrist from buckling under. The other purpose is to exercise control over weight and pressure (Rubenstein, 1929). Similarly, in piano playing other variables can cause changes in tone quality. Some of these are: how we depress the key, the use of pedals, dynamics, and articulation (Hamilton, 2012).

Technique foundation and ear training

There is a close relationship between the production of a beautiful tone, and technical training. We must cultivate and explore the best tools, and we have to understand how to use those tools in order to master any musical challenge that may arise in our future playing. We must analyze the parts of each physical motion consciously, and use our ear as the main guide. First of all, we should know that we have a significant amount of control over tone by applying different performance techniques. Most of these techniques are generated in the muscular actions of arm, hand and shoulder.

This muscular energy is sent to our finger tips, and that is why we might explore different kinds of touches that can help us to play the desired effects in our music. Through exploration, we may understand the five basic touches: forearm rotation, finger touch, loose wrist, arm weight touch, and finger action. These touches will help us to produce either thinner or richer gradations of tone. For example, if we want to play delicate passage work, it would be better to use finger action. Conversely, if we want more sound, we would use hand touch or arm weight (Hamilton, 2012).

Throughout this musical journey, one of our main guides will be our ear. In fact, that's why a fundamental part of weekly lessons with the students need to make sure the fully ear awareness of them with the music. It may be odd to think that

piano students do not listen to what they are playing, but it is not uncommon. The ear is as important as technical training. Both musicality and technique require accuracy and control. The adjustment of the hand and arm to conditions that produce good tone is half of our work (Lhevinne, 1972).

Stylistic considerations in Baroque performance

As soon as our students start a new piece, we need to invite them to study the musical style of that time, and become familiar with the particular techniques, musical instruments, and musical characteristics of the period. This knowledge will guide them toward an accurate interpretation in terms of tonal production, and they will offer a more informed performance. The interpreter must know how to be in harmony with the spirit and style of the work (Abravanel, 1999).

During the Baroque era, there were three principal keyboard instruments: the harpsichord, the clavichord, and the organ. It is highly recommended that our students play Baroque music on one of them, as it will give them a real taste of the sound, and the tone quality that they will want to emulate on the piano. But, if they don't have that opportunity we could listen together recordings performed on period instruments with and without the music in front of us.

This tool will be one of the best ways to understand how Baroque music should sound. Also, it is important to know that there was not only one type of harpsichord during the Baroque era, therefore, there was not a single-toned sonority, as we might imagine. There were Italian, German, French and English harpsichords, each of which had a different tone quality. The Italian harpsichord produced a heavier, richer, and rounder tone. The German Harpsichord produced quite a different sound from the brighter brilliance of the French, and the English was perhaps the most silvery of all of them (Ferguson, 1963).

The texture of music during the Baroque period was mainly contrapuntal. Therefore, we need to work diligently with the balance between the voices, as everything needs to be heard and every line has equal importance. In fact, clarity of the sound was an essential part of the style (Turek, 2015). Our students must take care when playing Baroque music on our modern piano because one of the main characteristics of the modern instrument is the richness in harmonics, which could cause a blurry sound, not representative of the style.

The role of ornamentation was significant in Baroque music. During the Baroque time, composers wanted musicians to add ornamentation. And in addition to that, performers were expected to improvise, especially at cadences. One of the most important Baroque composers was J.S. Bach, and ornamentations played a crucial role in his compositions. Thirteen of these are listed in his own handwriting, together with the interpretation, at the beginning of the Little Keyboard Book of 1720 (Ferguson, 1963). Our students need to be familiar with all of them, and if not we should consult good editions that will explain them how to execute them.

II. Let's explore

Prelude and Fugue in d minor BWV 875 by Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude

The first consideration with this prelude is the rhythmic pulse. Ideally it needs to be internalized before it can be performed well. In this prelude, the rhythmic pulse is quite evident as it is in much of Bach's music. Indeed, the driving rhythmic pulse is a key feature in the Baroque style, and particularly in this piece. Throughout the prelude, the pulse should be clear as the music needs to move constantly. It may be helpful to imagine the music drawing circles in the air. These circles just go around and around, keeping the energy and serving as the motor of the

prelude. Another image that may be helpful is to imagine the rhythmic pulse forming a spring of pulses.

The second consideration is related to the articulation. In this specific prelude there are three main figures: sixteenth notes, eighth notes and a few quarter notes. The best treatment, in terms of articulation, will be to play the sixteenth notes non-legato, or more detached. We should remember that non-legato does not mean staccato. Its purpose to clearly articulate notes in rapid passages where an extreme connection between tones is not desired. This touch can be used to good effect in many of the works of the older masters, such as Bach. Certainly,

as music teacher, we must encourage our students to experiment with all of the possibilities, but if we decide to play legato the rhythm will be less crisp, and the tone will not be stylistically appropriate. We need to maintain the sensation of forward movement throughout the prelude, and playing with a more detached articulation can help to maintain that energy.

The third consideration is related to the amount of energy between the inner voices. We should consider which notes to bring out. Being strict with the accent notes, and clear (but not too legato in the inner voices) will help to maintain the energy.



Figure 1. Inner voices measures 1 to 5

Another feature that we should explore is the contrapuntal texture in this prelude. It is possible to make the interaction between the voices more prominent for the listener, but we need to create

this sense of interplay from one measure to the next. We can explore those contrapuntal interactions in three different places in this prelude. The first is from measures 13 to 17 as shown in figure 2:



Figure 2. Contrapuntal interactions measures 11 to 20

The second contrapuntal interaction goes from measure 31 to 35, and connects eighth notes across the bar line.



Figure 3. Contrapuntal interactions measures 31 to 35

The third important contrapuntal feature occurs between measures 47 to measure 50



III. Suggested practice tools

During practice our ear needs to anticipate and respond to the sound. Our ear needs to be absolutely engaged. In fact, it needs to run the show. Of course we need to teach our hand how to do it, but the practice sessions are not only about the physical approach. It is easy to practice a passage many times without getting the correct sound. As piano teachers, we need to instruct our students to follow where the ear leads them and design specific practice tools in order to gain full mastery of the music.

This Bach prelude demands that the student work on finger independence because without it, the performer will not be able of to achieve a beautiful Baroque tone. One issue that appears very quickly in this prelude is that some fingers want to linger over some keys. It is really important to track those fingers and train them to leave the key on time. So, one tool for achieving this desired result is to play each note and stop on different sixteenth notes in the bar. We must remember to continue to play one note after the finger that causes the problem. For example if the finger problem is in the third sixteenth note, go

to the fourth sixteenth note and stop there. Through exercises like this, we can teach our student's hand new tricks, techniques, and responses.

In the first measure Bach wrote a descending scale in the right hand, and it needs to be played clearly with detached articulation. One possible way to practice is to play from the D, and go to the B flat, and stop there.

After repeating a few times, we can then play the entire scale. The goal is to be absolutely sure that every note is speaking.

In the left hand, our students must be sure to articulate the first quarter note. It is important to feel the separation between the two quarters, rather than to play them legato. We might even imagine a little beat of air or space between them.



Figure 5. separation between both quarter notes

In the second measure, we need to work on the inner voices and the outer voice. This will be crucial in order to keep the driving rhythmic pulse that is characteristic of the Baroque era. As we discussed before, the articulation for the sixteenth notes will be detached, so we have to be sure not to

connect the notes. The secret is to make sure that every finger leaves the key. As a practice technique, we may stop at the second sixteenth note of each grouping, making sure that we listen clearly every note.



Figure 6. stopping practice

In measures 6 to 8 the challenge is in the left hand. It will be helpful to make an “out” and “in” motion with the arm over the keys because it will give support to the fingers, and at the same time

maintain the energy that we are looking for. In short, it will help us to keep the tempo steady, and the passage clear.



Figure 7. “out” and “in” motion

In measures 9 to 13 we have scales in contrary motion. Here again, we need to take care that every note speaks. So we may use the same practice technique suggested earlier. This technique may be applied throughout the next several bars.

of the prelude. But with this lighter sound we need to ensure that we do not play accents on the first beat of each grouping. Slight accents are ok on the downbeat of each measure, at the beginning of each pattern, but then, it is important to release the hand.

In measures 18 to 25 we may decide to use a lighter sound. This could change the tone quality



Figure 8. contrary motion scales

IV. Fugue

In the prelude, we discovered the importance of the driving rhythmic pulse, and the essential rhythmic idea. But this fugue presents a different set of issues related with the melodic concept, which will lead our students to make different decisions related to tone quality.

Two issues that must be considered are the overall tempo of the fugue, and the articulation of the subject. With respect to the tempo, it should not be played too fast so that students can explore how to shape the melodic idea. Another clue to the appropriate tempo is that the second part of the subject has a chromatic fall. Thus, if we play it in a faster tempo, it will be difficult to emphasize that dramatic chromatic fall.

Related to the articulation of the subject, we may decide to play it smoothly, but it is a special kind of Baroque legato, which is shorter. If we were playing a romantic work, the legato would be more related to the shape. In a Baroque legato we need to hear a little bit of space between the notes in the subject. It can help our students to remember that a legato in Bach is about hearing each interval well, and taking care that each pitch sounds clearly.

The second half of the subject has the chromatic fall. If we follow the rule pertaining to the articulation of eighth notes in the Baroque, we would play them detached. However, we could play it with a Baroque legato, which will add drama to that descending scale.



Figure 9. dramatic chromatic descending scale

With tone, another important consideration is the balance and the sound, especially during the fugue. In this case we have a fugue in three parts, so we need to balance the three voices. For example, in measure 5 there is a little connection passage, and our student's mandatory questions should be:

What do we want to hear as primary, and secondary sounds? Do we want to hear the triplets, sixteenth notes, or the eighth notes more? If they chose to hear the sixteenth notes, it will lead them to the second entry of the fugue.

FUGA VI.

 The image shows two staves of musical notation for 'FUGA VI.' in 3/4 time, marked 'a 3.'. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. A green circle highlights a passage in the lower voice (bass clef) in measure 5, which consists of a descending chromatic scale: G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.

Figure 10. balance between voices

Another example that results from the exploration of balance is in measure 17. On this measure we could choose to play the bass line with more emphasis. Then in measure 18 we may

choose to play it lighter, and to initiate an “answer and response” between voices that continues on measure 18.



Figure 11: conversation between voices in measures 17 to 18

V. Let's wrap up

Both students and teachers need to spend time in the exploration of a beautiful tone through articulation, voicing, and listening. As piano teachers who work diligently with students in order to help them to acquire a beautiful tone, we must have a mental concept of what a beautiful tone is. Listening will be crucial when we play, and if we don't like the sound that we are hearing, we must find ways to adjust our physical gesture to make it better. We may experiment with arm weight, and through visualization of the sound before we play it (Lhevinne, 1972).

Beautiful piano playing requires tonal control of the instrument, deep knowledge of a pianist's physical and technical mechanics, a solid technique, and strong ear training. But also, we must explore and develop our awareness of sound and how it should be shaped. These factors will equip our students with, and will give them the ability to express themselves at the piano. Technique and the true engagement of the ear will have a key role in this exploration, and ultimately will affect the tone quality. On the other hand, a music score is just the medium between composer and performer. It is our main job to bring it to life. As professional pianists and piano teachers, we must know the conventions of the performance style of each composition and help our students to learn about them as they explore mechanics, technique and tone. But we must

remember that our main objective is beautiful piano playing. While achieving this is not an easy task, and it will require a lifelong commitment of constant exploration, it can be achieved.

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