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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 9.2. Bach's Lesser Trios of the 1750s and 1760s

The year 1754 saw Bach's sharpest focus on trios since his renovations of the early ones in 1747. Two of the 1754 trios are experiments; designated *sinfonias*, they anticipate the actual *sinfonias* that Bach began writing again in the following year. Both are for two violins and continuo, although the less challenging D-major work (H. 585) is better known as an obligato-keyboard trio (W. 74). The latter is historically significant, as the second violin part is wholly subsidiary; when Bach assigned the first part to the keyboard, this trio-*sinfonia* became an accompanied-keyboard sonata, a type that he would not produce again before the mid-1770s.¹ The A-minor work (W. 156) is the more interesting of the two musically, and its style is more explicitly orchestral. The first movement makes much of the spectacular effect of huge leaps in both violins parts, which are often in unison, as in actual symphonies of the period. Evidently Bach was practicing for the orchestral *sinfonias* that he would produce the following year.

Both trio-*sinfonias* end with minuets in rondo form, another borrowing from the orchestral tradition; Hasse, for example, had ended his overture to *Leucippo* with such a movement.² Bach re-used both minuet-rondos as character pieces. That of the D-major trio-*sinfonia* became “La Louise” (W. 117/36), and the final movement of the A-minor work circulated independently as a keyboard piece, as well as in the keyboard sonata W. 65/33. In both versions, the movement is entitled “La Coorl,” apparently referring to the Zerst violinist Carl Höckh.³ A third trio, W. 163 of 1755, would again conclude with a character piece in rondo form, “La Sophia.”⁴ That Bach was now willing to include such movements in his sonatas is an indication of his deference to what must have been a public demand for relatively simple musical diversions

The last of the four 1754 trios, W. 158 in B-flat, anticipates Bach's *sinfonias* in another way: although not in *sinfonia* style, its slow movement incorporates passages in which all three parts play pizzicato. These are not “de-ornamented” (*decoliert*) varied reprises, like the pizzicato passages in the D-Major *Sinfonia* W. 176, but rather episodes within an imitative movement. Nevertheless the inventive scoring is one of a number of original touches that make this trio more

¹ One movement of this type already occurs in the early W. 71.

² *Leucippo*, premiered at Dresden in 1747, was performed at Berlin in 1765.

³ In CPEBCW 2/2.2:xvii the title is explained as a reference to Carl Fasch. Zelter's biography of the latter (*Karl Friedrich Christian Fasch*, 8) shows that “Coorl” was the pronunciation that the Viennese-born Höckh would have used for his own first name as well as Fasch's. But as Fasch arrived at court only a year after the piece was written, Bach is more likely to have named it after the violinist, although this might have been forgotten in later years.

⁴ See below on further versions of W. 163. A quartet in C by J. G. Graun for flute, violin, viola, and continuo (GWV Av:XIV:2), bearing the same title (“La Sophia”) in SA 3383, is unrelated.

imaginative than the two trio-sinfonias, even if it remains fairly lightweight. Equally diverting, if hard to take seriously, are the athletic octave leaps in the fugue subject of the last movement, which even appears in the bass. Such strokes would have made this an exceptionally entertaining piece to see performed at a concert, and it is not surprising that it was published a few years later not only within the *Musikalisches Mancherley* but also in a separate reprint, despite its length and difficulty.⁵

Bach's subsequent trio sonatas are far blander works, probably composed for the amateur market. One of these, however, is of interest because of its puzzling instrumentation for viola, "bass flute," and continuo. Although musically trivial, the F-major trio W. 163 cost Bach some trouble; its survival in two autograph scores, giving different versions, has been explained as the result of Bach's initial failure to understand the compass of the wind instrument, which has been identified as a bass recorder.⁶ Bass recorders from the early eighteenth century are not rare, but their use at Berlin as late as 1755 is puzzling, as is the restricted range of the part. Bach wrote it for what he calls a *Bassflöte*, in a note to himself in the second autograph. There he indicates that the instrument has a compass of only an octave and a half, from f to c"; the revised version indeed restricts the part to this range (notated an octave lower). This raises the possibility of an instrument other than a recorder, which normally has a range of somewhat over two octaves. At Berlin after 1750 the logical guess would be for some sort of transverse flute, but no such instrument of this range is known, nor does Quantz mention a type of flute apparently pitched a sixth below a normal one. It is particularly surprising that Bach writes much of the part for this instrument in the lower part of its range, where either a flute or a recorder would have been relatively weak. The commission for which Bach is presumed to have written the piece cannot have been exclusive, for he subsequently arranged the work for two violins as W. 159 in B-flat, and it was also played with bassoon on the woodwind part.⁷

Bach owned a copy of a similarly scored work by Graun, provoking the suggestion that both trios were commissioned by someone in Bach's Berlin circle who owned a bass flute of some kind.⁸ That Bach indeed worked on commission in his trios of the 1750s is confirmed by his note in the autograph of the trio-sinfonia in A minor, indicating that he wrote it for the Silesian count Johann

⁵ Both publications came out in 1762–63 from Winter of Berlin and were presumably authorized by the composer; see CPEBCW 2/2.2:155–56. The much less interesting D-Minor Trio W. 160 had appeared previously in *Mancherley*.

⁶ CPEBCW 2/2.2:xvi.

⁷ As indicated in two manuscripts (sources D 22 and D 57 in CPEBCW 2/2.2; the latter is one of at least two manuscript copies of trios that belonged to Friedrich Nicolai). Telemann had also written sonatas with parts alternatively for bassoon or recorder, albeit the normal alto variety, as in no. 36 in F minor (TWV 41:f1) from *Der getreue Musik-Meister* (Hamburg, 1728–29).

⁸ Hofmann, "Gesucht: Ein Graunsches Trio mit obligater Baßblockflöte," 254, notes the trio for violin, "violoncello o flauto basso," and bass listed as lot 155 in Leisinger, "Die 'Bachscher Auction.'"

Nepomuk Gotthard of Schaffgotsch—presumably one of those who two years later supported Frederick's seizure of his country at the outset of the Seven Years' War.⁹ Many of the more numerous trios by the Graun brothers must also have been products of commissions; what appear to be later trios by Gottlieb Graun, especially those which include a flute part, show a simplification of style comparable to that seen in Bach's trios of the 1750s.

Bach's last Berlin trio shows the same trend toward simplification; composed in 1766, the C-major sonata for keyboard and flute (W. 87) is the least substantial of his works in this scoring, although unlike the four earlier ones it appears to have been composed from the start as an obbligato-keyboard work.¹⁰ The five obbligato-keyboard trios that immediately preceded it, however, are quite different. The first of these, for keyboard and viola (W. 88), dates from 1759 and is something of a transitional piece, pointing toward the four “great” violin trios of 1763 but also looking back to the more contrapuntally conceived but rambling and expressively rather neutral early trios. Bach declares its seriousness by placing all three movements in the minor, and he assigns a little more thematic material than usual to the bass, although the counterpoint is not really any more compelling than in his other pieces of this type. The sources assign the string part alternatively to the viola da gamba, but the work's reserved style is completely unlike that of the two earlier solo sonatas for virtuoso gamba and continuo (W. 136 and 137). Why Bach wrote it is unknown, but the royal gambist Ludwig Christian Hesse had remained at Berlin during the war,¹¹ as did Gottlieb Graun, whose trios, quartets, and concertos constitute the first significant solo repertory for the viola (and, in their alternative instrumentation, the last for the gamba). Even Friedemann Bach composed three viola duos, although these were probably completed only after his arrival in Berlin.¹² All these compositions, together with Emanuel's trio with bass flute and his three late quartets (see chap. 10), point to serious cultivation of the viola at Berlin.

⁹ This is the Schaffgotsch who, as Christoph Wolff points out (CPBECW 2/2.2:xvii), was described by Marpurg in that very year (*Historisch-Kritische Beyträge*, 1:409 and 507) as a Prussian functionary and a member of the Musikübende Gesellschaft. The latter was one of the Berlin “academies” whose meetings were probable venues for performances of this and other works. Wolff also notes evidence of a similar commission for the Trio W. 157.

¹⁰ Bach may also have performed W. 87 as a duo for two keyboards. Couperin had suggested this instrumentation as an option in the “Avis” to his *Apothéose de Lully* (Paris, 1725), which is scored as a trio sonata. Bach left instructions for performing W. 87 as a duo for two keyboard instruments (see CPEBCW 2/3.2:79); two of the ensemble sonatinas of a few years earlier also involved two keyboards.

¹¹ Hesse left Frederick's service in 1763 but was apparently working for Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm by 1766. He left Berlin for Darmstadt in 1771 or 1772, where he died shortly afterward; see O'Loghlin, *Frederick the Great and His Musicians*, 125–27.

¹² See my *Music of W. F. Bach*, 143–45.