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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 2.3: Bach's Silbermann Clavichord

That Bach acquired the famous instrument around 1746 is based on a note dated Sept. 30, 1781. The latter reportedly accompanied a lost manuscript containing copies of Bach's Rondo W. 66 and another by Baron Dietrich Ewald von Grotthuß.¹ The note, signed by Grotthuß, is said to have indicated that Bach owned the Silbermann instrument for thirty-five years.² Richard Troeger asserts that Emanuel received the Silbermann instrument from his father in 1738,³ but this appears to be an unsubstantiated inference drawn from a report that Emanuel owned the Silbermann instrument for “close to fifty years.”⁴

Surprisingly, there seems to be no unequivocal evidence as to which member of the Silbermann instrument-making dynasty made Bach's instrument, although it is always assumed to have been Gottfried. Not is there direct evidence as to the construction of the instrument, which is usually assumed to have been unfretted. Passages in Bach's music that would be hard or impossible to play as written on a fretted clavichord include: Sonata W. 55/2, movement 1, measure 78 (d-flat–c slurred, with *Bebung*), and movement 2, measures 30 (simultaneous f'/g-flat") and 48 (a-flat'–g' slurred, with trill on latter); also the legato chromatic scales in the concerto W. 43/3, movement 1, measures 24–26 and elsewhere. Bach wrote W. 55/2 for his Silbermann clavichord, according to a review in the *Hamburger Correspondent*.⁵ Burney reported Bach's playing “his last six concertos, lately published by subscription,” i.e., W. 43, on the same instrument.⁶

¹ Is it merely a coincidence that the Prussian court was acquiring fortepianos by Silbermann around the same time? See Oleskiewicz, “The Trio in Bach's *Musical Offering*.”

² See CPEBCW 1/8.1:xvi–xvii for the full text and translation.

³ “Bach, Heinitz, Specken, and the Early *bundfrei* Clavichord,” 144.

⁴ “beynahe 50 Jahren lang”; Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon*, vol. 2, col. 515.

⁵ July 31, 1779; extracted in Suchalla, *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: Briefe und Dokumente*, 1:763.

⁶ Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany*, 3:271–72.