

David Schulenberg
The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 8.3. Nichelmann's *Die Melodie* and the Response by “Dünkelfeind”

The principal aim of Nichelmann's “improvements,” ably summarized by Youngren, was to distinguish two types of music. One type, which Nichelmann terms “monodic” (*monodisch*), is dominated by “the superficial beauties of an elaborately ornamented melody.” In the “polyodic” (*polyodisch*) type, “melody and harmony work together satisfyingly, the harmony changing in rich and surprising ways that complement the inflections of the melodic line.”¹ Nichelmann does not name the composers of the original works, but Thomas Christensen has identified about half of the forty or so illustrations of “monodic” writing, which Nichelmann “corrects” by giving “polyodic” versions of the same music.²

Many of Nichelmann's examples belong to the tradition of “composition by variation,” which Bach sometimes practiced, and which both composers might have learned in their early studies at Leipzig. “Dünkelfeind” recognizes that Nichelmann's “polyodic” harmony is little more than embellishment: “chords can be broken, and from this arise innumerable variations.”³ Sometimes, however, Nichelmann does the reverse, simplifying the original, and some of his own alternate versions of passages from vocal compositions are essentially new settings of the same text. One might expect that Nichelmann would favor types of embellishment that he learned in his studies with Friedemann and perhaps Sebastian Bach. Indeed, his first example of “polyodic” music (Nichelmann's example no. 14) is a florid sarabande from one of Sebastian's French Suites. Yet he also criticizes an aria from Sebastian's cantata BWV 84 (coincidentally his example no. 84) for its “monodic” use of an over-embellished melody. Nichelmann improves the original aria by stripping out most of the passing tones (online example 8.4). His reworking of an aria from Graun's *Ezio* (Nichelmann's example no. 96) yields a similar result, although in this case his variation is barely recognizable as such, retaining only the basic harmonic outline of the original (online example 8.5).

Today it may seem unsurprising that a pupil of Sebastian Bach should wish to replace the drum bass of Graun's aria as in Nichelmann's example. Yet similar bass lines are ubiquitous in actual compositions by Bach's pupils, including Nichelmann. They are essential to mid-century style because they generate motion or urgency without diverting attention from the melody; replacing them with something that is superficially more interesting dilutes the direct “speaking” character of the music. The aria from Sebastian's cantata is an expressive meditation, the one from Graun's opera a typical “rage” aria. That Nichelmann could turn both into banal minuets suggests an impoverished sense of the possibilities of musical expression—to say nothing of the tactlessness of attacking a work that was staged that very year at the royal opera, possibly with Nichelmann

¹ Youngren, *C. P. E. Bach and the Rebirth of Strophic Song*, 188.

² Christensen, “Nichelmann contra C. Ph. E. Bach.”

³ “Die Accorde lassen sich brechen, und daraus entstehen unzählige Veränderungen” (“Dünkelfeind,” *Gedanken eines Liebhabers der Tonkunst*, 9).

Example 8.4. J. S. Bach, aria “Ich bin vergnügt,” from *Ich bin vergnügt mit meinem Glücke*, BWV 84 (movement 1), mm. 1–8, (a) [original](#) (oboe and strings omitted), (b) [Nichelmann's version](#) (his example 85)

(a)

[S] Ich bin ver - gnügt mit mei - - - nem Glü - cke,
[b.c.]

(b)

[S] Ich bin ver - gnügt mit mei - nem Glü - cke,
[b.c.]

5

das mir der lie - be Gott, das mir der lie - be Gott be - schert,
das mir der lie - be Gott, das mir der lie - be Gott be - schert.

Example 8.5. Graun, aria “Va dal furor portato,” from *Ezio*, mm. 1–6, (a) original, (b) [Nichelmann's version](#), both from his example 96

(a)

[S] Va dal fu - ror por - ta - to pa - le - sa il tra - di - men - to, pa -
[b.c.]

(b)

[S] le - sa il tra - di - men - to. Va, va dal fu - ror por -
[b.c.]

5

le - sa il tra - di - men - to. Va, va dal fu - ror por -
ta - to pa - - - le - sa, pa - - - le - sa il tra - di - men - to.

himself playing continuo alongside Graun. How Nichelmann's version of either aria could be said to be more “polyodic” than the original is unclear; as “Dünkelfeind” writes, “The polyodic style as described may well exist only as a mere notion of the author.”⁴

Nichelmann's critiques of Emanuel's works are as arbitrary and his rewritings as mediocre as those of other music. In the Concerto W. 11, published in 1745 and in 1755 still probably one of Bach's best-known works, Nichelmann rewrites the bass of the opening theme to avoid the “monotony” (*Eintönigkeit*) that, in his view, results from the repeated note in the melody and the unchanging harmony (online example 8.6). He complicates both melody and bass in the second phrase of Bach's song “Amint” (W. 199/11; online example 8.7). In Bach's setting of a drinking song by Gleim, “Den flüchtigen Tagen” (W. 199/5), Nichelmann expands a brisk phrase into a banal sequence (online example 8.8).⁵

Nichelmann attacks Bach's “Die Küsse” (W. 199/4) as insensitive to the poetry and tedious musically; an extended musical example (no. 77) provides an alternate version of the complete song. All three lieder had appeared in a 1753 anthology, marking Bach's first published contributions to the genre in ten years. “Die Küsse” is a seemingly inoffensive setting of a poem by the pastor Nicolaus Dietrich Giseke, remarkable for its division into three unequal stanzas of eight, six, and seven lines, respectively. Bach's setting, accordingly, is partially strophic: its three strongest musical articulations mark the breaks between Giseke's three stanzas, and the music for lines 1–2 returns for the opening of the second stanza. Bach's first through-composed song, it was his most ambitious effort yet within the genre.

Nichelmann's critique amounts to little more than what Youngren describes as “endless repetitions of the need to create harmonic variety and diversity.”⁶ Focusing solely on the surface of the music, Nichelmann rewrites the opening of Bach's song to shorten the pedal point that originally underlay the first three measures, yet he keeps the second line of the poem in the tonic. He fails to understand that Bach's initial avoidance of harmonic motion—as in the Concerto W. 11—creates a higher-level contrast with the accelerated harmonic rhythm that begins in the next phrase, as the latter modulates to the dominant (online example 8.9). In addition, Bach's setting delicately emphasizes the word *niemals* (*never*) with a syncopation (mm. 7–8), and he varies the texture. Nichelmann eliminates both features, even though one might have thought that they render Bach's setting “polyodic.” Nichelmann instead writes in a uniformly three-part texture, adding an inner voice in measures 6–7, which Bach had reduced to two parts. In measures 3–4 he introduces a cliché of the Dresden-Berlin style—one that recurs, curiously, in the corresponding measures of a chorus by Homilius that Bach incorporated into his 1769 Pentecost music at Hamburg (online example 8.10).

⁴ “Die polyodische Art, wie sie der Herr Verfasser beschreibt, mögte wohl nirgends anders, als in der blossen Idee des Herrn Verfassers existieren” (*Gedanken eines Liebhabers*, 14).

⁵ Many of Nichelmann's illustrations include both an original figured bass and his own fundamental bass, with figures, on a third staff; the latter is omitted from the present examples.

⁶ C. P. E. Bach and the Rebirth of Strophic Song, 199.

[Example 8.6. Concerto in D, W. 11, movement 1, mm. 1–3, \(a\) original \(Nichelmann's example 29\), \(b\) Nichelmann's version \(his example 30\)](#)

[Example 8.7. “Amint,” W. 199/11, mm. 5–8, \(a\) original \(Nichelmann's example 73\), \(b\) Nichelmann's version \(his example 74\)](#)

Ein wei - ter Raum trennt La - la - gen von mir. Ein wei - ter Raum trennt La - la - gen von mir.

[Example 8.8. “Trinklied,” W. 199/5, \(a\) original, mm. 19–22 \(Nichelmann's example 38\), \(b\) Nichelmann's version \(his example 39\)](#)

Ich will mich ver - gnü - gen, so lang ich noch bin. Ich
will mich ver - gnü - gen, ich will mich ver - gnü - gen so lang ich noch bin.

Example 8.9. “Die Küsse,” W. 199/4, mm. 1–9, (a) [as published, without later autograph revisions \(mm. 1– 5 = Nichelmann's example 45\)](#); (b) [Nichelmann's version \(from his example 77\)](#)

(a)

Daß ich bey mei-ner Lust durch kei-nen Zwang mich quä-le, und mei-ne Küs-se nie-mals zäh-le,

(b)

Daß ich bey mei-ner Lust durch kei-nen Zwang mich quä-le, und mei-ne Küs-se nie-mals zäh-le,

The image shows two versions of a piano accompaniment for a vocal piece. Version (a) is the original as published, and version (b) is Nichelmann's revision. Both versions are in 3/4 time and G minor. The lyrics are: 'Daß ich bey mei-ner Lust durch kei-nen Zwang mich quä-le, und mei-ne Küs-se nie-mals zäh-le,'. The accompaniment consists of a right-hand treble clef and a left-hand bass clef. In version (a), there are some ornaments and slurs in the right hand. In version (b), the right hand has a different melodic line, particularly in the final measure where it ends with a whole note chord.

Example 8.10. Homilius, chorus “Herr, lehr uns thun,” as incorporated into *nach Herr, lehr uns thun, nach deinem Wohlgefallen*, H. 817 (movement 1), mm. 17–20 (winds and strings omitted)

17

S
Herr, lehr uns tun nach dei-nem Wohl-ge-fal-len

A

[b.c.]

p 7 8 7
6 5

The image shows a vocal score for a chorus. It includes three staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), and Bass (b.c.). The music is in 3/4 time and G minor. The lyrics are: 'Herr, lehr uns tun nach deinem Wohlgefallen'. The Soprano part starts at measure 17. The Alto part starts at measure 18. The Bass part starts at measure 17. There are dynamics markings: *p* at the beginning, and fingerings 7, 8, 7, 6, 5 indicated below the bass line. There are also some plus signs (+) above the notes in the Soprano and Alto parts.

Elsewhere as well, Nichelmann makes arbitrary alterations that result in a less subtle setting. For instance, where Bach twice has the accompaniment drop out at the word *allein*—emphasizing it quietly through a reduction in texture, which also happens to constitute text painting—Nichelmann underscores the word harshly both times with a diminished-seventh chord (online example 8.11). This is more dramatic, and the thicker texture, with its explicit dissonances, might be thought more worthy of a pupil of Sebastian Bach. But Gieseke's poem is, as Youngren shows, a neoclassical pastoral. Nichelmann's version not only coarsens the traditionally gentle tone but, by over-emphasizing a single word, breaks up the long and rather complicated sentence that fills the last five lines of the first stanza. Where Bach fills the rests in the vocal line with notes in the accompaniment, Nichelmann writes silences. The point of these lines is

that, although older people were once as interested in kissing as is the youthful speaker of the poem, now (*allein*) they know when to stop. The word *allein* is therefore more a conjunction (“only” in the sense of “but”) than an emotive adjective (“alone”). In short, Nichelmann has misread the poem.

[Example 8.11. “Die Küsse,” W. 199/4, mm. 16–26, \(a\) as published; \(b\) Nichelmann's version \(from his example 77\)](#)

The image displays a musical score for the song "Die Küsse" in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (bass clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4.

System (a): Measures 16-22. The lyrics are: "Die Al-ten, lehrt er mich, die pfleg-ten auch zu küs - sen, Al - lein".

System (b): Measures 23-26. The lyrics are: "nicht auf-zu - hö - ren wis-sen, al - lein" (measures 23-24) and "Die Al-ten, lehrt er mich, die pfleg-ten" (measures 25-26).

System (c): Measures 19-22. The lyrics are: "auch zu küs - sen, Al - lein, nicht auf - zu - hö - ren wis-sen, al - lein".

Bach's contemporaries evidently considered all three songs as successful without the benefit of Nichelmann's corrections. Bach was able to reissue them, together with other early lieder, in his *Oden* (Odes) of 1762, which he brought out again in 1774. In doing so he naturally ignored Nichelmann's suggestions, adding instead a few small revisions of his own: in his personal copy (*Handexemplar*) of the 1774 edition, he inserted by hand an introduction and a closing passage for the keyboard in “Die Küsse.”⁷

⁷ Bach's *Handexemplar* is preserved as SA 1689. Whether his autograph additions are improvements is debatable; they make the voice's asymmetrical opening phrase of five measures sound like a surprise after the square four-bar introduction.

As “Dünkelfeind's” comments suggest, Nichelmann's book was a misguided rationalization for the author's irrational musical preferences. One suspects that something personal lay behind it, and the book must have contributed to Nichelmann's departure from royal service shortly after its publication, even though it was dedicated to the king (presumably with permission if not financial support). Although it received a sympathetic review from Marpurg—hardly surprising in view of the adoption by both of Rameau's harmonic theory—any competent writer could have demolished Nichelmann's arguments.⁸ Bach was certainly capable of doing so, and as a colleague he would have had good reason to write under an assumed name. Christensen finds points in “Dünkelfeind's” argument that “reveal him to have had first hand knowledge of Nichelmann”;⁹ besides, Bach later regretted the hostility (*Feindseligkeit*) that had led him to criticize an unnamed former pupil who “remained in the dark.”¹⁰

Against Bach's authorship, however, must be set “Dünkelfeind's” incorrect identification of two of Nichelmann's examples as extracts from Quantz's flute concertos.¹¹ Bach, who knew Quantz and had probably played in most of the latter's concertos composed up to this point, is unlikely to have made such a mistake in print. His choice of words in writing of darkness and enemies (*Feinde*) naturally calls to mind the name *Dünkelfeind*. But Nichelmann, who was only three years younger, is not known to have ever studied with Bach, although the possibility of some sort of lessons at Leipzig cannot be ruled out.

More seriously, Bach is unlikely to have attacked the principle of variation. “Dünkelfeind” asks, without irony: “What composer would set down for himself a whole series of chords and then draw out of them a melody? And could there be fire, spirit, and life in such a piece?”¹² Christensen cites this passage as evidence for Bach's authorship, arguing that “Dünkelfeind” here inveighs for

⁸ Marpurg's unsigned review appeared in his *Historisch-Kritische Beyträge*, 2:260–69. By the time it came out, Nichelmann had left the king's service; Marpurg reports both “Dünkelfeind's” reply and Nichelmann's subsequent response to it, as well as the latter's replacement at court by Carl Fasch.

⁹ “Nichelmann contra C. Ph. E. Bach,” 206.

¹⁰ “blieb in Dunkeln,” letter of Feb. 18, 1783, to Schwickert (no. 224 in *Clark, Letters*, 191). Bach appears to be referring to notes that he has drafted, possibly for a new edition of the *Versuch*.

¹¹ Christensen, “Nichelmann contra C. Ph. E. Bach,” 200, reports that Nichelmann took responsibility in his reply to “Dünkelfeind” for composing these examples; although reminiscent of Quantz's style, their incipits cannot be found in QV.

¹² “Welcher Componist würde sich wohl eine ganze Reihe Accorde hinschreiben und daraus hernach eine Melodie heraus ziehen? Und könnte auch in einem solchen Stücke wohl Feuer, Geist und Leben seyn?” (“Dünkelfeind,” *Gedanken eines Liebhabers*, 14).

even-handed reliance on melody and harmony, like the balance of light and shade in painting.¹³ The phrase *Licht und Schatten* was, however, a cliché, repeated in Bach's *Versuch* as well as in Quantz's. Both writers, moreover, demonstrate the emergence of melody out of “chords” in precisely the manner that “Dünkelfeind” mocks, Quantz more literally so than Bach. Quantz demonstrates melodic embellishment of brief melodic lines by first showing the chords that underlie individual tones in the melodies (see [online example 2.2](#)).¹⁴ The figured-bass scales and “skeleton” (*Gerippe*) that Bach would advocate as the basis of improvisation in the second volume of his *Versuch* are not exactly “series of chords,” but they are close enough that Bach is unlikely to have written essentially the opposite thing eight years previously. It is also difficult to imagine Bach citing Rameau with approbation—“Rameau says, entirely rightly, that song or melody and harmony must together make a piece that falls pleasantly on the ear”¹⁵—even if this is merely a rhetorical device to hoist Nichelmann by his own petard.

As in the case of the so-called Comparison of J. S. Bach and Handel, also sometimes attributed to Emanuel, the latter is unlikely to have devoted valuable time and energy to a published polemic, even if he was willing to indulge his pet peeves in conversation or in letters. “Dünkelfeind's” legalistic focus on defining terms (such as *melody* and *harmony*), together with the near-absence of serious discussion of Nichelmann's examples, points toward a musical amateur in Bach's circle. “Dünkelfeind” does point out two borderline cases of parallel fifths in Nichelmann's version of “Die Küsse,”¹⁶ but Bach surely could have defended his own songs and criticized Nichelmann's versions more concretely. The argument through much “Dünkelfeind's” pamphlet for the priority of “melody” over “harmony” points toward someone like Krause, who, although sympathetic to Bach, could not fully comprehend or articulate a professional composer's understanding of what it meant for melody and harmony together, as Nichelmann argued, to constitute a good composition—or to recognize how melody does in fact depend for its coherence on harmony (in the sense of background voice leading). In any case, whoever wrote “Dünkelfeind's” tract probably had the benefit of conversations with Agricola, the Graun brothers, perhaps Quantz, and others who would have had an interest in Nichelmann's treatise.

¹³ “Nichelmann contra C. Ph. E. Bach,” 209.

¹⁴ Quantz, *Versuch*, xiii.13–26.

¹⁵ “Rameau . . . sagt ganz recht, daß der Gesang, (oder die Melodie) und die Harmonie beyde das ihrige thun müssen” (“Dünkelfeind,” *Gedanken eines Liebhabers*, 15); *ihrige* refers to “ein Stück das . . . angenehm ins Ohr fällt.”

¹⁶ *Gedanken eines Liebhabers*, 13.