

“...pour La Luth à Cembal”:

Deciphering the Instrumentation of Bach's *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, BWV 998

Jonathan Godfrey

This paper was written for the Music History I course under the supervision of professors Patricia Callaway and Dr. Snyder

In the liner notes of a double CD-set of performances dubbed “The Great Recordings” of guitarist Christopher Parkening, Scott Bach briefly outlines the *Allegro* from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, BWV 998. “The undated manuscript specifies no performance instrument,” he asserts (Parkening 15). This confident observation must either be a misunderstanding or an inefficient way of describing the somewhat ambiguous nature of the suite's instrumentation, for J.S. Bach's own autograph does in fact indicate two possible instruments to perform the work in the title of its first movement: “*Prelude pour La Luth à Cembal*” – “Prelude for the Lute or Harpsichord.” Yet while Scott Bach is clearly mistaken on some level, his inadvertence in citing a particular instrument to perform the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* parallels the uncertainty of the many scholars that have struggled with ascertaining the most interpretively correct instrumentation of the work.

Bach’s designation for BWV 998 to be performed on either the lute or harpsichord is not in itself terribly disconcerting. All three movements, for all practical purposes, are playable by both instruments. By virtue of this fact alone, one observes that neither instrument is inherently incorrect to perform the work according to Baroque standards. Bach scholar Robert Hill explains: “...an exclusionary categorization of pieces for a specific instrument is not the rule in early 18th-century German keyboard music. Rather, the idiomatic nature of the piece itself determines whether performance on a particular instrument is tasteful or not” (13-14). While this philosophy assuredly holds true for the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, there are several unique elements in the work that warrant further investigation into its instrumentation. Bach’s dichotomous instrumentation designation is in itself quite an anomalous occurrence in his catalogue. Furthermore, many eyebrow-raising compositional patterns and orthographical decisions found within the work propose numerous questions about what instrumental idioms it accommodates.

Some scholars are reasonably convinced that the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* does not stylistically reflect keyboard music. David Case, in his interpretative edition of BWV 998 for guitar, notes that “...from a musical perspective, the general style conforms to the lute music of the period. In addition, the low register and overall tessitura of the composition are well within the capabilities of the baroque lute” (4). The details of how Case believes this writing specifically reflects that of the lute will be addressed later. While the Baroque lute is capable of handling most of the work’s versatile technical demands, a literal realization in many areas is virtually impossible on the instrument (Leathwood 14). Additionally, there are enough texturally thick areas, particularly in the *Prelude* and *Fugue*, to make one speculate that perhaps the keyboard idiom was in mind when Bach composed the work. If so, the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* is in the awkward position of being associated with two disparate phenomena – a sound and style that lends itself to the lute, and a performance idiom that lends itself to the keyboard.

Many scholars believe that both of these attributes might be conveyed at the same time by a rare Baroque instrument entitled the *Lautenwerck*, or “lute-harpsichord.” The instrument essentially is a three-octave gut-stringed harpsichord intended to imitate the sound of the lute (Ripen 363). Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720-1774), a pupil of Bach's, described the sound of a lute-harpsichord that Bach is assumed to have had in John Adlung's *Musica mechanica oranoedi*:

It had two courses of gut strings, and a so-called Little Octave of brass strings. In its normal disposition – that is, when only one stop was drawn – it sounded more like a theorbo than a lute, but if one drew the lute stop such as is found on a harpsichord together with the cornet stop, one could almost deceive even professional lutenists. (139)

If Bach indeed wrote the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* for the lute-harpsichord, many questions surrounding the work's instrumentation seem to be answered, as the instrument simultaneously satisfies the complexity of the keyboard-like idiom and the lute-like sound of the writing.

The presumption that the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* was written for the lute-harpsichord immediately raises a difficult question: if Bach wrote the work for the lute-harpsichord and not the lute or harpsichord, why did he not specify it that way? Bach was certainly aware of the instrument's existence. In fact, he at least had a hand in assisting in the construction of a lute-harpsichord in his lifetime. Some more extreme claims state that he built his own or invented the instrument altogether (see the preface to Jerry Willard's lute suite guitar transcriptions). There is evidence that Bach had two lute-harpsichords in his estate upon his death in 1750, indicating that he must have been well-versed enough in its technical and coloring capabilities that if he had indeed wanted BWV 998 to be performed on the instrument, he assuredly had the authority to say so. What then kept Bach from identifying the performance instrument of BWV 998 as the lute-harpsichord if it was indeed the instrument that was to play the work?

While it may be alluring to discount the lute-harpsichord as a valid performance instrument of BWV 998 due to the lack of an official designation by Bach, it is important to recognize that none of his existing autograph works specify the use of the lute-harpsichord at all. It is quite possible that he might have designated his first Lute Suite BWV 996 to utilize the instrument, as a manuscript copy by a favorite pupil of Bach's, Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713-1780), bears the following inscription on the title page: “*Preludio con la Svite/da/Gio: Bast. Bach./aufs Lauten Werck*” (Ripen 363). Even so, there is no way to know for certain whether or not Bach himself identified the instrumentation on the original manuscript. After all, despite the evidence that exists around BWV 998's association with the lute-harpsichord, Bach did not specify it as the instrument of choice. Bach's avoidance of decidedly appointing the lute-harpsichord in his works might stem from the fact that the lute-harpsichord was quite a rare instrument in his time (just as it is today). Moreover, Bach is not known to have had possession of one until 1740, a little later than the post ca. 1735 completion date of the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* proposed by Hiroshi Hoshino, who arrived at this date by examining Bach's handwriting and watermarks on the original manuscript. While this ambiguous date is not authoritative by any means and might be close enough to the time that Bach is said to have owned a lute-harpsichord to satisfy some critics, it serves as a reminder that there is

a possibility of Bach not even having access to a lute-harpsichord at the time of BWV 998's composition.

If Bach owned a lute-harpsichord during the period in which the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* was written, we may speculate that the instrument might have been important in the actual reading of the work if not the performance of it. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach once wrote that his father typically composed away from any instruments and only later tested the result of his composition by playing through it on the keyboard (Burkholder 445). This speculation brings an intriguing fact to the foreground when concerning Bach's reading of his lute suites: he is never known to have played lute at all. In fact, his lute compositions were typically read or performed by such famous contemporaries as Sylvius Leopold Weiss and Johann Kropffgans (Wolff 342). However, with a lute-harpsichord, Bach would have had immediate access to the timbres he needed for complete realizations of his lute works while still allowing him to perform on a keyboard instrument.

If the account of Johann Sebastian's compositional process by Carl Philipp Emanuel is correct, it raises some concerns when contemplating the seemingly keyboard-influenced idiom that pervades the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*. It is certainly probable that Bach composed the three pieces away from any instrument and used a keyboard instrument (perhaps lute-harpsichord) only to "test his results" (Burkholder 445). However, since BWV 998 does seem to be more contoured technically toward the keyboard than the lute, it is reasonable to suggest that a keyboard instrument did at least have some impact on the compositional process. After all, Bach was especially known to be one of the foremost keyboard virtuosos of his day, a fact that assuredly affected his compositional process.

Regardless, it is crucial to keep in mind that the lute is a much more tedious instrument to write for polyphonically than the keyboard in terms of hitting notes simply due to the construction of the instruments and the manner in which they are played. Additionally, though technical problems may arise in a literal rendering of a lute performance of the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, they should not eliminate the possibility of Bach's having written the piece for the lute. Since Bach himself was not a lutenist, it seems legitimate to allow him room for technical error in the sphere of more esoteric instrumental idioms. In addition, the mere fact that he did specify lute first in the title of the work and harpsichord second should do away with any thought of the instrument not being involved with the work.

As mentioned above, one scholar who advocates the association of the lute with BWV 998 is David Case, who argues that Bach's orthographic writing style in the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* is comparable to lute tablature. He states that the notation of the work is in some ways very similar to the *style brisé*, a notation that was common among seventeenth century French lutenists and which was also later adapted to the French school of keyboard playing (5). He explains the style in more detail:

In the *style brisé* the notes of the various voices (eg. soprano, alto, tenor, bass) were presented in apparently random succession, most often one at a time, but with occasional block chords and longer strands of motion occurring within a single voice. Thus the individual voices make little rhythmic sense when heard separately; the effect of the music can only be understood by following the composite rhythm of the voices. (5)

Case goes on to elaborate that lute music in tablature resembles this style because lute tablature gives no specification on the duration of individual notes, but instead on their rhythmic placement to each other (5). A key difference between authentic *style brisé* and this style of lute tablature, however, is that in lute tablature, the performer is faced with the task of deciding what notes to sustain in order to present the piece with the utmost clarity in its “voice-leading, harmony, and melodic coherence of the individual voices” (Case, 5). *Style brisé*, on the other hand, does not attempt to maintain a linear progression of voices or to distribute rhythmic and harmonic lines (Case, 6).

It then seems that by Case’s judgment, the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* has the look of lute tablature that has been written out in staff notation. The work cannot be written in the authentic *style brisé* because Bach utilizes what Case identifies as “implied polyphony” throughout the piece – a line which visually seems single, but actually contains multiple voices (Case 7). Examples of this implied polyphony are not difficult to find: Case thinks it likely that it is interpretable that the *Prelude* exemplifies it virtually from beginning to end (27).

While most of BWV 998 is made up of this seemingly tablature-related orthographical style, there are other writing styles that Bach uses. For example, Case notes that in the B section of the A-B-A structured *Fugue*, there are instances in which Bach uses fully contrapuntal orthography to clarify the precise texture (7). Another interesting orthographical anomaly occurs at the end of the *Allegro*, where Bach resorts to full organ notation. It is doubtful that this gesture hints at a keyboard-performance component of the work beyond further proving Bach’s clear understanding of the idiom: it appears that he simply ran out of space on the page and needed an efficient way to notate the ending so as to not waste score paper (which was made by hand at the time) (14-15).

Guitar scholar Jonathan Leathwood shares with Case the sentiment that the *Prelude* was probably not conceived with the authentic *style brisé* in mind, saying that it would be mistaken to superimpose the term over “Bach’s trademark”: multi-voiced voices. (29) Yet through a concentrated examination of the bass notes of the *Prelude*, Leathwood simultaneously throws a serious wrench into Case’s perception of a relationship between lute tablature and the orthography of BWV 998.

The bass notes of the *Prelude* are unequivocally short and allow for little overringing. Bach’s extensive use of rests in the lower voice assures us that he is clearly implying separations of bass notes and long counts of silence. Some modern guitar interpreters of BWV 998, including world-renowned guitar performer and pedagogue Sharon Isbin, find these acute markings to be quite uncomfortable for several reasons (37). The already dry resonance of the guitar, and to a different extent, the lute and harpsichord, make the cutting off of bass-notes seem aesthetically undesirable. Even more undesirable is that cutting off the bass notes tends to disconnect what appears to be a very lyrical line in the lower voice, sometimes even defeating what some might interpret as an obvious sequential phrasing pattern (see Figure A).

The reasoning behind the brief duration of the *Prelude*’s bass notes would be clear if the pitches clashed harmonically with the upper voices, yet just the opposite is true. An example of their harmonic clarity with the upper voices may be found in the first measure, where the tonic is played in the lower voice while the upper line revolves

solidly around, reductively, the chords of **I** and **IV** (see Figure B). Since the tonic is in both of these chords, letting the bass ring out through the measure does not conflict with any apparent chord realizations. Furthermore, while bass notes in later measures move away from being specifically part of the triadic spelling of the chords implied in the upper voices, the lower voice, if acting as a pedal, again never confuses the overall harmonic idea.

This evidence suggests that Bach had a clear purpose in making the duration of the bass notes so short and with such precision. With this idea in mind, Leathwood makes two important points that indirectly question the work's supposed relation to lute tablature. He first states that the care Bach took to outline the rests would be completely lost within lute intabulation since tablature does not express exact rhythmic durations, only notes in relation to each other (14). Secondly, while Leathwood supports the idea of utilizing Bach's "trademark" idea (bringing out voices within a voice, as mentioned above), he notices an inconsistency with bringing out multiple voices in the upper voice in the *Prelude* in relation to the short bass note. By studying other pieces among Bach's lute, keyboard, and cello works, he comes to the conclusion that:

Bach sustains a pedal bass when it is underpinning a multi-voiced texture. Now we can turn the point on its head: the fact that Bach notates the bass to be played short should give us some indication that the treble voice [in the *Prelude* from BWV 998] cannot bear much of a polyphonic rendering (that is to say, much over-ringing of notes). (30)

Leathwood might not be the only scholar who finds excess polyphony above a silent lower-voice to be bothersome. In fact, legendary guitarist Andrés Segovia might have unwittingly reinforced this point in his own transcription of the *Prelude*. Segovia is notorious for not necessarily adhering to proper Baroque scoring in his Bach transcriptions for guitar. His transcription of the *Prelude and Fugue*, – his published editions of BWV 998 do not include the *Allegro* – with its many crescendos and decrescendos, expressive dynamics, and in-score mood directives (i.e., “*tranquillo*” in the *Prelude* and “*dolce e calmo*” in the *Fugue*) is no exception. Regardless, the only time that Segovia resorts to an orthographical style that reflects multiple voices within what appears to be a monophonic line in the *Prelude* is when the lower voice has prolonged activity throughout a given measure (measures 30-32). The significance of this fact is that it is presumable that Segovia is making this decision solely based on his own distinctive tastes, which easily favor the indulgent principles of Spanish Romanticism over any type of orthographically strict Baroque procedure. Therefore, Leathwood's argument for the abstinence from multi-voiced textures over a short bass line is validated even beyond Bach's demand to do so: apparently, other respected musicians have genuinely found the gesture simply to be unattractive.

The short bass notes of the *Prelude* cause further trouble in the matter of Baroque lute technique. Leathwood notes that many Baroque lutenists would have found the constant stopping of bass strings to be impractical, as their plucking thumbs would have normally been just as occupied with the upper voice as the lower (14). Modern lute presentations of the *Prelude's* bass notes seem to vary – a 1994 lute recording by Jakob Lindberg completely forgoes the rests, while a 1991 recording by Lutz Kirchhof observes them exactly. More than likely these differing performances reflect choices in

interpretation rather than technical difficulties. This suggests that the lute has always been able to perform the lower voice accurately, but the technical practices of Baroque lutenists might not have made such interpretive decisions very practical.

These speculations surrounding the *Prelude's* bass notes imply that Case is only making an assumption when he states that BWV 998 is directly related to lute-tablature. Indeed, by Baroque standards, the “implied polyphony” that he finds might not even exist in the *Prelude* by at all. Even so, this idea does not completely invalidate the possible association of the *Prelude* with lute tablature. Just because a given piece is written in tablature does not mean that multiple voices *have* to be found and brought out from a single voice. But as a riposte to Case's argument, the shortened lower voice of the *Prelude* does leave room to think BWV 998 was composed in a manner that may not be specific to lute tablature.

The complicated issues raised by the short bass notes of the *Prelude* do not stop at the lute, however. In fact, a perhaps even more concerning shadow might be cast over the lute-harpsichord. Harpsichord maker Anden Houben notes that the gut-strings found in a lute-harpsichord naturally have less sustain than metal strings. This would probably allow for most lute-harpsichord makers to dispense with damper systems altogether (supposedly producing a more realistic lute-like over-ring). As a result, the common lute-harpsichord's nonexistent muting capability would be forced to leave the short notes of the *Prelude's* lower voice at the mercy of the instrument's natural decay (for a prime example of this uncontrolled over-ringing, see Robert Hill's 1999 lute-harpsichord recording of the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*). It seems quite strange that Bach would have gone to such meticulous lengths to annotate rests for an instrument that does not have the capability to observe them.

By examining the bass notes of the *Prelude*, an element of the work that some might perceive as a bit trivial, the reader may begin to understand the giant scope within which one could argue for the performance of the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* on a particular instrument. Yet the irony of all of this discussion is that the classical guitar, arguably the instrument most commonly associated with the modern-day performance of the work, is perhaps the one most ill suited for it. The guitar is totally anachronistic to the Baroque period; it lacks much of the range needed to perform the work, especially in the lower register; and it is even unable to perform the work in the original key of E-flat-major without creative use of *scordatura*.

In this light, it is clear that the importance of understanding the instrumentation of BWV 998 is not to provide some sort of ultimatum for a “correct” or “incorrect” performance. Neither is it meant to chain the music to a certain instrument. Indeed, as we have seen, one can make a persuasive argument that Bach wrote the work for any of the three Baroque instruments mentioned above (lute, harpsichord, or lute-harpsichord). Instead, understanding the instrumentation helps us gain deeper insight into the mind of the composer, an invaluable resource for any analytic or interpretive undertaking. In the case of the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, perhaps Bach's ambiguity toward instrumentation forces one to analyze the work in the same manner Bach is said to have composed: away from any particular instrument and only with the steadfast inner musical ear that the virtuous musician should whole-heartedly trust.

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BACH, Johann Sebastian Prelude pour la luth Cmbal (BWV 998) facsimile manuscript autograph of Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in Eb major, BWV 998 source : Ueno-Gakuen Music Academy, Tokyo short bibliography : GOEFFRAY, Jonathan "...pour La Luth Cmbal: Deciphering the Instrumentation of Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro, BWV 998" source : <http://www.lagrange.edu/resources/pdf/citations/2007/music/music%20-%20johnathan%20Godfrey.pdf> LEAHY, Anne "Bach's Prelude, Fugue and Allegro for Lute (BWV 998) : A Trinitarian Statement of faith ?" (Journal of the Society for Musicology) Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in E-flat major - BWV 998. Instrumentations : HARPSICHORD Keyboard (piano, harpsichord or organ) (1) Original GUITAR Guitar solo (standard notation) (6) Guitar solo (notes and tabs) (1) VIOLIN - FIDDLE Harpsichord, Violin (2) ORGAN - ORGANO Organ solo (2) PIANO Piano solo (1) keyboard (1). Arrangers : Bach, Johann Sebastian Original (1) Bergeron, Guy (1) Lopes, Edson (2) MACHIELLA, MAURIZIO (1) Magatagan, Mike (1) Riz Ramadhan (2) Rodriguez, Felix (1) Not attributed (5). Suite pour le Luth Cembal (BWV 998) Johann Sebastian Bach Keyboard (piano, harpsichord or organ) (Original) / Intermediate / 1 PDF. Connect to add to a playlist. Added the 06-23-2014. BOBRI La Tecnica Di Segovia (Vladimir Bobri - The Segovia Technique). Emilio Pujol - Metodo Razonable per Chitarra vol.1, vol.2 (Escuela razonada de la guitarra).pdf. Barnett James G The Old Man and Spring. Amazing Grace Violin Duet - Violin, Violin. Frevinho - Wellington Gomes.docx. Manuel De Falla - Siete Canciones populares Espaolas (Voice and Guitar). Roberto Carlos - Preciso Saber Viver. Ribs 0189. Johann Sebastian Bach Bwv 998 Prelude Fugue Allegro. Uploaded by. Evandro Gracelli.