

THE PERIODICAL OVERTURE IN 8 PARTS I (*GLI UCCELLATORI*) JOHANN CHRISTIAN BACH

Published by Robert Bremner at the Harp and Hautboy, opposite Somerset-House, in the Strand

Issued: 30 June 1763; price 2 shillings

Source: Henry Watson Music Library – Courtesy of Manchester Libraries,

Information and Archives, Manchester City Council: BR580Ba75

Editors: Barnaby Priest & Alyson McLamore



COMMENTARY

Robert Bremner (c.1713–1789) launched his new series of *Periodical Overtures* by featuring the work of a rising star in London: the twenty-seven-year old Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782). Bach’s career took a circuitous path before he met the Scottish publisher. The youngest son of the great Lutheran musician Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Christian had been only fifteen when his father died in 1750, so he moved from Leipzig to Berlin to live with his half-brother Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who oversaw Johann Christian’s music instruction for the next five years.¹ Before he had turned twenty, however, Johann Christian took a step that no member of the Bach family had ever taken: he went to Italy. There, he was surrounded by opera—a genre never produced by either his father or his half-brother. In fact, Charles Burney later published his regret that neither of the older Bachs “had been fortunately employed to compose for the stage and the public of great capitals” since he believed that that would have led them to write “in a style more popular, and generally intelligible and pleasing.”²



The younger Bach, in contrast, was increasingly drawn to opera. He contributed arias to various *pasticcio* entertainments, and in 1760, he crafted a new overture for the Turin production of the opera *Gli uccellatori* (The Bird-Catchers) by the Bohemian composer Florian Leopold Gassmann (1729–1774). The *dramma giocoso* had premiered a year earlier, in Venice, and had also enjoyed a staging in Milan in late 1759. It is unknown why Gassmann’s own overture was not retained for the Turin performance, which opened on 1 September 1760.

Turin offered even more opportunities for Bach: *Artaserse*, his first operatic commission as sole composer, premiered less than three months later. This successful launch led to subsequent Italian productions as well as an invitation in mid-1762 to write two operas for the King’s Theatre in London. Bach asked for a year’s leave from his employment as second organist at Milan Cathedral, and he made his way to England in July 1762—the same year that Bremner was opening the London branch of his music publishing business.³

Bach presented *Orione*, the first of his operas in Britain, in February 1763, and it was a triumph; even King George III and Queen Charlotte attended the premiere.⁴ This instant fame surely piqued Bremner’s interest in securing Bach as a “headliner” to help launch the *Periodical Overtures*. It is easy to imagine that the Scot paid a call on the young German emigré to describe his publishing project and that Bach was pleased at the

¹ Christoph Wolff and Stephen Roe, “Bach, Johann (John) Christian,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), Vol. 2: 413–4.

² Charles Burney, *A General History of Music From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789, repr., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, [n.d.]) 2:955.

³ Gärtner, *Johann Christian Bach*, 160.

⁴ Grove, s.v. “Bach, Johann [John] Christian,” by Wolff and Roe.

chance to build his reputation as the composer of instrumental music, not just vocal.⁵ The income certainly would have been welcome; some twenty years later, Carl Friedrich Cramer noted in the *Magazin der Musik* that Bremner was one of the London publishers who “paid well for the privilege” of engraving Bach’s music.⁶ It seems likely that it was Bach himself who offered Bremner the score of his unpublished substitute *Gli uccellatori* overture to use as *Periodical Overture No. 1*.

There is plenty of evidence to indicate that Bach’s operatic work was a popular choice for Bremner’s series. There are records of far-flung performances: the Edinburgh Musical Society played it on 1 July 1768

M U S I C.

This Day is publish'd, Price 2 s.

(Number 1.)

THE Periodical Overture; in 8 Parts. Composed by Signor GIOVANNI CRISTIANO BACH.

Printed and sold by R. Bremner, at the Harp and Hautboy, opposite Somerset House, in the Strand.

The Publisher having Correspondents abroad who supply him with the new Musical Compositions of the most celebrated Authors for Concerts, &c. begs Leave to inform the Lovers and Promoters of Music, that he intends to publish a Symphony for Concerts every Month, under the Title of, THE PERIODICAL OVERTURE: That those who reside in the Country may be served regularly with this, along with other Periodical Works, the Publication shall continue to be on the last Day of the Month.

N. B. No Piece that may have formerly been printed in Britain, shall appear in the Course of this Undertaking.

and again on 28 January 1785, while the piece opened benefit concerts in New York on 9 February 1770 and in Boston on 26 October 1772.⁷ It figured in the 1785 Moravian holdings in Fairfield, England, and it was published in keyboard arrangements at least twice; the first was issued more than twenty-five years after the orchestral publication, and it appeared again in 1798 in an issue of *The Piano-forte Magazine*.⁸

The structure of the *Periodical Overture No. 1* reflects the close kinship between Italian operatic overtures, or *sinfonie*, and early symphonies. It is in three movements, in a typical fast-slow-fast tempo arrangement, and the middle movement is in the key of G, the subdominant of the outer movements’ D major tonality. Although Bremner would eventually exceed the “eight parts” limit in some of the later

items in the series, he eliminated the trumpet and timpani parts from Bach’s operatic version. As would be true in all of Bremner’s *Periodical Overtures*, the bass is figured.

The first movement also reflects many features of the newer “Mannheim” taste. It is marked “Allegro con Spirito” and presents a striking unison arpeggiated passage after a bold hammer chord. The eighth-note rhythms of the opening soon yield to sixteenths, reflecting the principle of increasing animation; the lower strings frequently perform “drum eighths” as part of the first theme’s steady propulsion through two- and four-bar phrases. The second theme at m. 29, in A major, drops to *piano* and features more polyphonic interweaving of lines; the winds frequently play sigh motives. After a series of sudden dynamic contrasts, Bach’s closing theme (m. 39) again opens at *piano* with the upper strings playing “tip-toe” passages in thirds.

Structurally, the “Allegro con spirito” is a sonata form without a development, which James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy call a “Type I Sonata.”⁹ Therefore, while the first theme is heard in A major beginning in m. 46, it immediately jumps back to the tonic D major in m. 50, followed by the second theme and closing theme in measures 69 and 80.

The “Andante,” like the first movement, is in common time, and has been called “elegantly poised.”¹⁰ The ensemble is reduced to strings alone, but there is again a strong opening chord, followed by numerous sudden dynamic contrasts. The “B” theme, starting in m. 9, is peppered with numerous Scotch snaps. The movement’s architecture is a rounded binary form, with the “A” theme returning in m. 21. The subsequent coda (m. 28) continues the contrasting dynamics, but gives the low strings occasional pedal tones on the tonic G.

The “Allegro assai” follows the popular trend of a gigue-like finale. Set in 3/8 time, it has the customary disjunct bounciness of a jig. It also is tied to the opening movement by means of a unison arpeggiated opening,

⁵ David Wyn Jones, “Robert Bremner and *The Periodical Overture*,” *Soundings* 7 (1978): 65.

⁶ Terry, *John Christian Bach*, 79.

⁷ Jenny Burchell, *Polite or Commercial Concerts?: Concert Management and Orchestral Repertoire in Edinburgh, Bath, Oxford, Manchester, and Newcastle, 1730–1799*, Outstanding Dissertations in Music from British Universities, ed. by John Caldwell (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 309, 342; O. G. Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life in America (1731–1800)* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907), 170, 273.

⁸ Karl Kroeger, “An Unknown Collection of Eighteenth-Century Instrumental Music,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 35, no. 4 (October–December 1988): 277, 280; Ernest Warburton, comp., *Part One: Thematic Catalogue*, vol. 48 of *The Collected Works of Johann Christian Bach, 1735–1782* (New York: Garland, 1999), 336.

⁹ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 345.

¹⁰ Ernest Warburton, program booklet commentary for Johann Christian Bach, *Opera Overtures Vol. 1*, The Hanover Band, conducted by Anthony Halstead, CO 999129-2, compact disc, 17.

again in a descending direction. Like the slow movement, it is in rounded binary form, with its opening melody returning in m. 45. Bach brings the movement—and the overture—to an emphatic close by repeating the tonic chord thirteen times in the last five bars. *Periodical Overture No. 1* gave the public a very fine introduction to Bach’s instrumental prowess as well as a promising indication of the quality of future items in Bremner’s series.

EDITORIAL METHODS

Transposing instruments: Transposing instruments are written in conventional modern format indicating original key—parts in original keys are available [e.g., Horn I in F (orig. in D)].

Slurs and ties: Editorial slurs are indicated using dotted lines; editorial ties are indicated by brackets.

Triplet/rhythmic grouping indications: In general, modern practice is followed. Occasionally (especially in slow movements), original subdivisions are used. Where groupings are inconsistently realized in the original source material, modern groupings are adopted.

Grace notes and appoggiaturas: These are generally treated as appoggiaturas and are given a value of half the note they precede; in cases where it seems clear that grace notes are intended in the original, a slash is added.

Alternate notes/ossia passages, etc.: When a written note is unplayable, an alternative octave substitution is indicated in smaller font and within brackets.

Accents/articulations/fermatas: There is considerable inconsistency in articulation throughout the set of periodical overtures. Following the Bremner edition, a wedge is used rather than a staccato mark. In some cases, the printed edition uses wedges and staccato markings within a movement (usually the slow central movement). When this is the case, both marks have been used. Where parallel passages indicate the use of articulations, these have been included between brackets.

Dynamic markings: In the original edition, the placement of dynamic marks can be inconsistent within the bar and sometimes across the barline. Where the correct placement of the dynamic is clear from the musical phrasing, the dynamics have been repositioned without comment. Where dynamics are less clear, or missing, the editor’s dynamics occur within square brackets.

Crescendo / diminuendo markings: “Cresc.” and “dim.” markings are generally used, but there are rare exceptions to this with the use of hairpins. Where these are editorial, they are enclosed in square brackets. Other markings such as *rinf.* have been retained except where it seems clear that this refers to a crescendo.

Realization of notational shorthand: For spacing reasons, some use of notational short-hand has been used. When this is the case, the first full beat has been written out.

Altered note values: In the sources, there are occasional errors and inconsistencies in note values. Where these occur, the altered note values are given within brackets.

Accidentals: As is standard modern practice, accidentals remain valid until the next barline. This differs from eighteenth-century practice where this convention was not consistently employed. Wherever this is the case, accidentals are added in brackets.

Figured bass: Although the eighteenth-century parts usually position the figured bass numerals above the relevant bass notes, the modern score and parts show them below the basso line.

Missing music: Where music is missing in the original, alternative sources are sought (e.g., when a bar is missing due to a printer’s error or when music is unreadable). When eighteenth-century concordances are unobtainable, editorial notes are added in smaller font within brackets.

CRITICAL NOTES

The notation of dynamics and articulation has been standardized throughout. Where these are missing in the original source, they have been reconstructed from parallel passages. These are indicated by the use of dotted slurs and brackets. Where there is inconsistency in the use of staccato articulation marks, the editors have taken decisions based on the collocation of the markings. As is common with music printed in this period, *appoggiature* are inconsistently notated. These have been standardized. Copyist errors have been corrected in brackets (see notes below), along with errors in accidentals. The horn parts have been transposed into F in the score. Metronome marks are a suggestion for performance only. Rehearsal letters, cues in parts, and bar numbers have been added for convenience.

Mvt. 2	Andante	
m. 1	Violin 2	appoggiatura A5 added to 3rd beat
Mvt. 3	Allegro Assai	
m. 54	Oboe 1, 2	octave transposition of unplayable A3

CATALOGUE REFERENCES

- RISM A/I B/BB 257 [Répertoire International des Sources Musicales;
<https://rism.online/sources/990003216>]
- Doksy 52 [Milada Rutová, “Waldstein-Doksy Music Collection: Thematic Catalogue” (Ph.D. diss., Charles University, 1971)]
- LaRue 9541 (B116) [Jan LaRue, *A Catalogue of 18th-Century Symphonies*, Volume I: Thematic Identifier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)]
- Schökel 185/1 (as 13; Einsiedeln Nr. 17) [Heinrich Peter Schökel, “Johann Christian Bach und die Instrumentalmusik seiner Zeit” (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, 1922)]
- Terry 277/4 [Charles Sanford Terry, *John Christian Bach*, 2nd ed., ed. H. C. Robbins Landon (London: Oxford University Press, 1967)]
- Tutenberg 44 [Fritz Tutenberg, *Die Sinfonik J. C. Bachs* (Wolfenbüttel-Berlin: Kallmeyer, 1928)]
- Warburton G23B [Ernest Warburton, comp., *Part One: Thematic Catalogue*, vol. 48 of *The Collected Works of Johann Christian Bach, 1735–1782* (New York: Garland, 1999)]

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Bach portrait: © National Portrait Gallery, London
Publication announcement: *The Public Advertiser*, 30 June 1763, p. 4 (courtesy of the British Library Archives)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ESSAY

<https://repertoire-explorer.musikmph.de/en/periodical-overtures-details/>

