

## THE ORNAMENTS IN BACH'S ORGAN WORKS

By SUMNER SALTER

EVERY student of Bach sooner or later comes face to face with the question of how to play the various "graces," or ornaments, which plentifully abound in all his compositions for the keyboard, and particularly characterize many of the organ chorales.

These are not by any means mere superficial embellishments which may be omitted at the option of the player as incidental and unnecessary to the meaning and beauty of a given composition. This perhaps is true in some cases but they are comparatively rare. As a rule these "graces" are vitally ingrained in the thought and conception of the music and are fundamentally essential to a correct interpretation as well as an adequate understanding of the works.

Emanuel Bach in his *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, in 1752, says of them:

They serve to connect the notes, they enliven them and when necessary give them a special emphasis; they help to elucidate the character of the music; whether it be sad, cheerful, or otherwise, they always contribute their share to the effect. An indifferent composition may be improved by their aid, while without them even the best melody may appear empty and meaningless.

It is difficult, in fact well-nigh impossible for us to comprehend the facility and matter-of-fact ease with which these features of the music of and before the time of Bach were instinctively employed by the composers and players of the day. They were undoubtedly the result of two contributing causes; first, and primarily, the nature of the keyboard instruments then in use, and second, the common artistic tendency to embellishment and love of elaboration in detail and elegance in style prevalent in all art of the period.

The French clavecinists were especially noted for this fondness for ornamentation and the practices they developed and adopted became the traditions which were followed more or less closely by composers and players of the other countries. Among these French players François Couperin, (1668-1733), was perhaps the

most noted. He was a pupil of Chambonnières, Court clavier player to Louis XIV, and the head of this early French school. Another pupil of Chambonnières was Jean d'Anglebert, and both became players at the Court of Louis XIV, the former being also organist of the royal chapel.

Couperin published four books of pieces for the clavecin, and more especially a harpsichord method in 1717, entitled *L'Art de toucher du clavecin*. Of his compositions Weitzmann says:

The highest part generally bears the principal melody, and this latter, like the inner parts and bass, is so overladen with appoggiaturas, trills, and other graces, that the melody, often in itself really elegant and graceful, appears as it were like a high-frizzed beauty, hidden by a richly wrought veil.

D'Anglebert also published, (1689) a work under the following long-winded title: *Pièces de clavecin avec la manière de les jouer, diverses chaconnes, ouvertures, et autres airs de M. de Lully, mis sur cet instrument, quelques fugues pour l'orgue, et les principes de l'accompagnement*. To quote Weitzmann again:

In the collection was a set of 22 Variations on the theme of "Folies d'Espagne," already treated in like manner by Corelli and later by Scarlatti; and the fugues for organ are strict and carefully wrought out.

Bach is said to have been acquainted with the works of d'Anglebert and Couperin, and also with those of Nicolas de Grigny, organist at Rheims, whose Suite in A he copied. He also copied a Suite in F minor by the celebrated violinist and clavecinist, Dieupart, who died in 1740, leaving six suites for the clavecin.

Bach's wonderful powers of assimilation of musical knowledge and material are well known. As a boy of ten he secretly took a book containing pieces by Froberger, (1605), Kerl, (1621), Buxtehude, (1637), and Pachelbel, (1653), which his older brother, Johann Christoph, under whose tutelage he was, had denied him, and copied the entire contents in his room at night. Froberger was a pupil of the renowned Frescobaldi in Rome, probably the greatest clavier and organ player of his time. Kerl was a pupil of Carissimi, also in Rome, and of Buxtehude, the celebrated Danish organist at Lübeck in North Germany, while Pachelbel, the noted South German organist in Nuremberg, was educated in his native city.

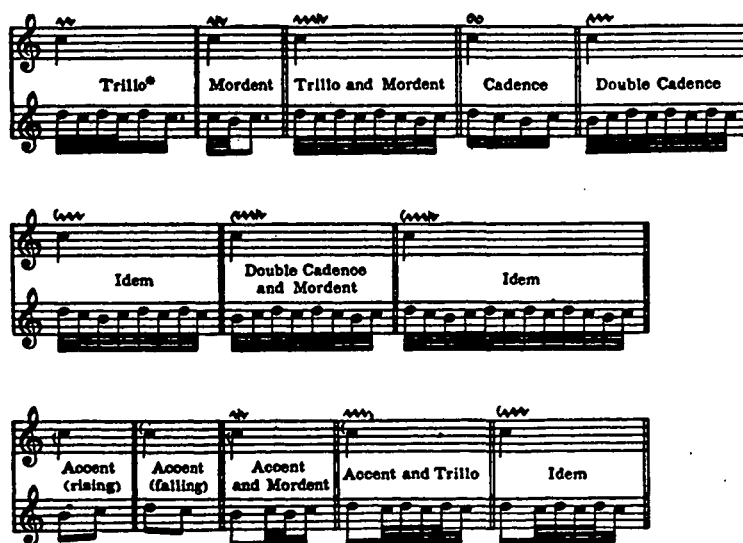
It was in this way, by industrious copying and study of these works of his predecessors, that Bach gained the greater part of his

schooling in composition and a practical knowledge of all that was known up to his time. In this way he acquired a sympathetic fondness for the refinements and delicacies of the ornaments and graces essentially belonging to the clavicin. Mention also should not be omitted of his thorough knowledge of the violin and the compositions of the great masters of the violin before his time, notably Vivaldi, gained in a similar way. Bach's first lessons in music were given to him upon the violin by his father.



It was because of this knowledge and practical skill as a player which he possessed as a foundation for the development of his marvelous melodic gifts that he was able to appropriate the various means of embellishment of the French School in a manner that gave supreme and unapproachable distinction to the examples of florid cantilena which he produced.


A number of the organ chorales exemplify this highly ornate melodic treatment in a pre-eminent degree. The following may be mentioned as specially notable and deserving of intimate study:—"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'," "O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde gross," "Schmücke dich, O liebe Seele" "Nun komm', der Heiden Heiland," "Vater unser im Himmelreich."

In all of these we find examples of the various signs tabulated by Johann Sebastian Bach for the benefit of his son Friedemann in the so-called "*Clavier-büchlein*," begun at Cöthen, 1720, as follows:




\* Trills are also indicated in Bach's works by the following signs: *tr*

In a study of the chorales we meet the necessity of frequent variation from a strict application of the interpretations of the signs as there given. We find this procedure to be justified by the fact that Bach not only used the same signs to represent different things but used different signs to indicate the same thing; *e. g.* the first sign given in the table—, which Bach calls a *trillo* and is sometimes indicated by a *t* or *tr* and often by a , is frequently used to denote the *Schneller*, *Pralltriller* or Transient Shake, all old names for what is called in modern usage the Inverted

Mordent;  and by some critics is said to be regarded in certain cases as a substitute for the *Vorschlag* or *Appoggiatura*:—

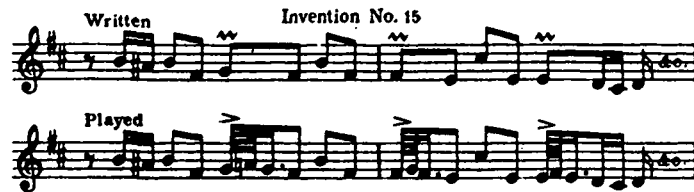


Instances of both we find in "Nun komm', der Heiden Heiland" where the *trillo* sign: , occurs in bars 15, 24, 29, and 33, and may not reasonably be construed as intended for a *trillo* nor yet necessarily as duplicating the use of the *Vorschlag* occurring in two figures in the fifth bar which is identical with bar 29, as given above.

Similar instances occur in "O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde gross"; viz.: bar 4, next to the last note; bar 7, on the first *g*; bar 9, in the first two groups; bar 11, in the second group; bar 12, in the second group; and bars 15 and 18 in the third groups.

A recent American edition of this and other chorales of Bach deserving the weight of authority affords no indication of these or any other alternatives to the explanation of the ornaments given in the *Clavier-büchlein* table, which follows the Preface to the edition. In this a strict adherence to the interpretation of the signs given being quite impracticable, the player is left quite at sea as to a proper treatment of them. A similar variation is necessary in "Schmücke dich, O liebe Seele," bars 54 and 70 (where the intention of a *Schneller* in bar 54 is emphasized by the *Mordent* used to match it in the corresponding place in the next bar), and in "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'," bar 2, 4, 5, 6, and others containing a similar figure.

These examples all correspond to the use of the same sign in the more familiar Two-voiced Invention No. 15, and many others.




Mention has already been made of the use of the  $\sim$  in bar 29 of "Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland" as possibly duplicating the *Vorschlag* in bar 5, which in the Best (Augener) edition appears as an *Acciaccatura*, ( $\text{h}$ ). Edward Dannreuther in his exhaustive treatise on "Ornamentation" intimates this possibility by presenting this quotation from C. Ph. E. Bach: "A mere *Vorschlag* may be occasionally substituted for a *Schneller* or *Pralltriller*," in connection with the two bars from the chorale in question, as follows:



This intimation however, that J. S. Bach intended the same thing in this case is not by any means necessary, nor is it at all plausible, for it is not only inconsistent, but the use of the  $\sim$  as a *Schneller* would appear quite natural and effective as an amplification of the *Vorschlag*; moreover it is not in accordance with the quotation, which permits a substitution of a *Vorschlag* for a *Schneller* but not the reverse.

Here it seems appropriate to dwell somewhat upon the very essential point mentioned by Bach and emphatically inculcated by his son, C. Ph. Emanuel Bach, that in all cases of accessory (dissonant) notes as ornaments, as *e. g.* the beginning note of the *trillo* and all *Vorschlge*, (or, as Bach gives them in the Friedemann Bach table, their equivalents,—"*Accents*,") the accessory note must be firmly accented, according to the length of time allowed, and be struck precisely *on the beat*. A thorough understanding of this point and strict adherence to it in practice will make clear the mistake of construing the *Vorschlag* as an *Acciaccatura*. Further reference to this important point will be made later in the consideration of the "*Accent*" signs.

Edward Dannreuther in his "Musical Ornamentation" mentions the puzzling ambiguity in the use of  $\sim$  and *t* or *tr* for shake,

*Pralltriller* and *Schneller*, and quotes the following from the Well-tempered Clavichord, Book I, Prel. XII, saying; 

Though the signs are identical there can be no doubt that the first stands for the *Schneller*, or transient shake, and the second for a regular shake, thus:—



The wide range of possibility in interpreting this ornament, the critical determination of the influence of the context, the effect of *tempo* movement, accent, and melodic outline, serve to magnify the difficulty of properly performing any of these greater chorales in which ornamentation has been carried to such a luxuriant extreme and is such a vitally essential element in their structure and wonderful beauty. There is no question but that the perplexities attending the proper treatment of the various ornaments, and also unfamiliarity with, if not ignorance of the alto and tenor clefs frequently employed in them, have unfortunately prevented organists from giving their attention to these incomparable examples of pure lyric composition for the organ.

The other embellishment signs given in the "table" of the "*Clavier-büchlein*," with the single exception of the two forms of so called *Accents*, are less doubtful in character and subject to uniformly consistent interpretation. While by no means comprehending the variety in use by Bach's predecessors they include the most of those he himself employed and are not difficult of understanding or of execution in detached form when once the essential features of the *trillo* and the so-called *Cadence*, (*Doppelschlag* or *Turn*) have been comprehended and practically applied. The *Mordent* requires no special comment and the *Trillo-and-Mordent* is a logical combination of the two. The *Cadence*, it will be noted, is a combination of the two forms of *Accents*, and in the four forms of the *Double-cadence* the direction of the initial line in the sign, as also the absence or presence of the *Mordent* at the close, determines the form of the figure. This direction of the curve in the initial line, it will be noticed, corresponds with the direction of the curve in the *Accent* signs. A curve or line from below corresponds to a rising "accent," and makes the equivalent of an inverted "cadence" or turn, which is not mentioned by Bach but implied in the *Doppel-cadence*.

*Accents*, in their form as indicated in the "table" are of rare occurrence, being found only in a few of the chorales, as follows, viz.:—in the Bach Gesellschaft edition (Vol. XXV-2), of "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein" and "O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde gross," the Peters Ed. of which gives them written out as appoggiaturas; in "Komm' heiliger Geist" and "Allein in der Höh' sei Ehr'."

This infrequent use is possibly due to the fact that a close adherence to strict rules of contrapuntal treatment would forbid their employment in polyphonic writing, whereas in the freer and essentially lyric treatment of the chorale melodies it was possible to employ them without violence to the purity of the voice leadings and no device might be regarded as too ornate to enrich the composition. Certain it is that in these chorales under consideration we have such examples of elaborate cantilena and profusely embellished melody as have never elsewhere been matched in organ literature.

As has been said, *Accents* are practically appoggiaturas, (German—*Vorschläge*), and as such come upon the beat of the principal note. While the indication given in the "Table" as to the execution of them is simple and perfectly clear it is not surprising to find in a study of the application of them a conflict of critical opinion. Hence we find that while in the Bach Gesellschaft Ed. they are employed in "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein" and "O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde Gross," in the Peters Ed. of the same chorales the notation of the equivalent appoggiaturas is given. In "Komm' heiliger Geist," Bach Ges. Ed., occur three from below and one from above, and in the Peters Ed. the same are given with the exception of the one from above which is written out as an appoggiatura. The chorale "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'" is unique in its exhibition of them, no less than thirty of them being employed.

A. Pirro, in his "Johann Sebastian Bach, the organist and his works for the organ," referring to the ornaments given in Bach's "Table," says of the *Accent*:

We find it employed, at least in organ compositions, only in an arrangement of the chorale "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'" (*Gloria in excelsis*). No piece could be more elaborated than this one; and in it are introduced a majority of the signs employed by Bach; we borrow from Mr. E. Dannreuther's interesting work, "Musical Ornamentation," the transcription of the first six measures of this chorale, fully written out.<sup>1</sup> Such an example will be more instructive than all we could say

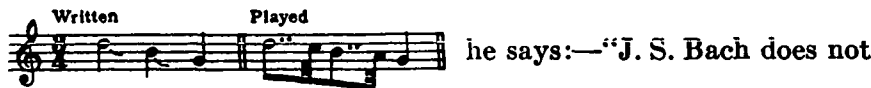
<sup>1</sup>In this transcription of Mr. Dannreuther's, I have indicated the location of the *accent* signs by stars. It is difficult to account for the inconsistency in the treatment of those on the last eighth beat of bars one and three.—S. S.



upon this subject, if the reader will take pains to compare this interpretation with the musical text as found in the well-known editions:—



Reference to the Dannreuther treatise discloses the first mention of this chorale in connection with a consideration of the *Nachschlag* or *After-beat*. This, he says, is “a grace expressed by means of a little hook, similar to the hook of a *Vorschlag*, but so placed as to *follow* one main note and precede another, thus forming a link between notes descending in thirds, or in seconds—”; and after three simple illustrations, not quotations, the first of which is sufficient for our purpose, viz.—



make much use of it, but *he has it* in some important pieces and students of his works cannot ignore it.” He then presents the first strain of the chorale “Allein Gott in der Höh’ sei Ehr’” as follows:



In this he has very strangely placed the *accent* marks or hooks nearer to the preceding than to the following notes in a manner not justified by the editions of the Bach Gesellschaft or Peters, nor yet of Best in the Augener edition. This would seem to be with the evident purpose to establish a fictitious ground for the interpretation given, in spite of the fact that in the next example, from the Flute sonata in E major, viz.—



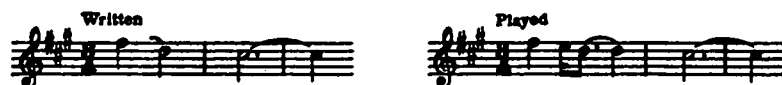


the *Vorschlüge* or "tiny notes," the equivalents of *Accents*, are placed close to the following notes.

Mr. Dannreuther has previously devoted several pages to a discussion of the *Vorschlag*, with many illustrations of various uses by Bach, grouped under separate headings treating severally of the short and the long *Vorschlag*. He says:—*Vorschlüge* whether short or long pertain to the time of the main note and receive the stress, thus—



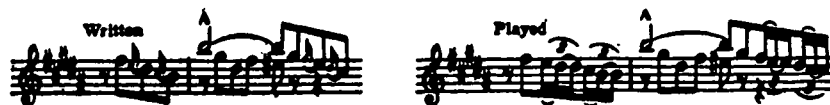
"Abundant proof that *appoggiature* when expressed by hooks or by little notes are generally short can be adduced from the scores of Bach's cantatas." He then presents examples of short *Vorschlüge* as follows:—from the Johannes Passion, Arie: "Ach mein Sinn,"—



Prel. C sharp maj. W. T. Clav. B'k II,—



and the following from Prel. XXIII, B'k 2, W. T. Clav. as *Vorschlüge* "written out as semi-quavers:—



then after two vocal examples instances the 8th and 9th bars from

the chorale "Vater unser im Himmelreich," Bach Ges. Vol. III (Peters Ed. Vol. VII, No. 52)—



The following matter discussing the treatment of the long *Vorschlag* is not pertinent to our present inquiry save in so far as it corroborates the conviction that the construction of the *Accent* signs in the "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'" as *Nachschläge* is a misinterpretation and quite contrary to the intention of Bach and the true spirit and meaning of the music. The incongruity is plainly manifest in a comparison of the two illustrations, the one from the Prelude XXIII just given and the other from the chorale—"Allein Gott in der Höh'" shortly preceding.

The question as to why Bach should have used the two means of expressing the same thing is not specially important but that the effect intended in both cases is practically the same can hardly be questioned with reason.

The same considerations apply in a comparison of the "Vater unser" and "Allein Gott."

Pirro, in his "J. S. Bach, the organist," previously mentioned, after the quotation from Dannreuther of the first four bars of the latter chorale says:

This is evidently a species of *appoggiatura*, as also in the chorale "Vater unser im Himmelreich," (*Clavier-übung* Part III). But in this case Bach uses a special notation:—(then follows the first bar of the example previously given). In his *Method for clavecin* Ph. E. Bach, in speaking of a similar figure, thus explains it: "The first note of this figure must not be made too short, if the tempo be slow or moderate; for the second would then be held too long. It should be gently dwelt upon, not suddenly hammered."

Here let us revert to the remark of Mr. Dannreuther under his discussion of the *Vorschlag*, viz.:

C. Ph. E. Bach merely touches upon the *Nachschlag* as a *grace à la mode* and expresses disapproval—*rightly, perhaps, for there is something rather weak about it*<sup>1</sup>. Still, respect for C. Ph. E. Bach's estimate can be no excuse for the errors of editors, who choose to leave the *Nachschlag*

<sup>1</sup>The italics are by the author.—S. S.

out of count altogether or to amend, that is to misunderstand and misinterpret it.

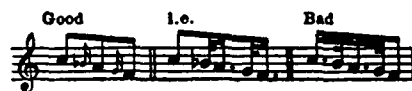
The mention of "errors of editors" naturally suggests the query who the erring editors are.

There can be hardly any question but that the chorale "Vater unser im Himmelreich" affords a most complete illustration of Bach's use of the *Accent written out*, as intended to be played; and the conclusion may be reached that it was on account of the variety of uses or connections in which the *accent* is employed (there being no less than 131 places where the equivalent is found in the upper stave of the score alone), that it was regarded unsafe or impracticable from the standpoint of correct interpretation, because of frequency of modulations and the consequent necessity for the employment of accidentals in connection with the signs, to make use of them for abbreviation purposes.

C. Ph. Em. Bach, called by Franklin Taylor the chief authority on Ornaments of his time, in his "*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*" (Essay on the true way of playing the clavier), 1753, says:—

All graces written in small notes belong to the next following large note, and the value of the preceding large note must therefore never be lessened.

He speaks of the "ugly *Nachschlag*" and strongly denounces the fashion of "separating the *Vorschlag* from its main note by either not dwelling upon it long enough or, what is worse, playing the *Vorschlag* too soon—*i. e.*, as part of the preceding note;" *e. g.*



As a final resort in deciding the question of the proper execution of the "accents" in the chorale: "Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr'," it would seem that appeal to an intelligent musical taste would suffice to determine in favor of the opinion held by Ph. Emanuel Bach concerning the objectionable effect of the *Nachschläge*, and that the illustrations given in "Bach, the Organist" and "Ornamentation" show clearly just how the "accents" in the chorale ought *not* to go.

# Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' To God on high alone be praise

Swell: 8' & 4' Diap., Flute, Strings  
Great: 8' Flute  
Choir: 8' Diap., Flute  
Pedal: 16', 8'  
Sw. to Gt. & Ch.; Ch. to Gt.

Edited by  
Sumner Salter

Choral Prelude by  
Johann Sebastian Bach

**Manuals**

**Pedal**

*Adagio*

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Gt.

(and time add 4' Fl.)