

J. S. Bach and the Unfretted Clavichord

Introduction

Nikolaus Forkel, the first biographer of Johann Sebastian Bach, mentioned that he «loved the most to play on the clavichord».¹ This famous statement is, indeed, often quoted by the protagonists of the clavichord. At the beginning of the twentieth century, some critics started to question this assertion of Forkel, suggesting that he could have been incorrectly informed and influenced by J. S. Bach's sons or could have even been swayed by his own personal preference for the clavichord.² Nevertheless, many sources from J. S. Bach's environment provide insight into the underestimated importance of the clavichord. For example, we are confronted with some confusion about the noun 'Clavier'. Furthermore, the development of the clavichord from a fretted to an unfretted instrument certainly took place during Bach's lifetime, which had an important function in tonal expansion as Bach elaborated on his keyboard works.

From a Fretted to an Unfretted Clavichord

The development from a fretted to an unfretted clavichord might have been influenced by the change in composition techniques as an interest in the use of distant keys increased. This harmonic expansion resulted in new tuning systems, introduced by Johann Georg Neidhardt in 1706 and Andreas Werckmeister in 1707, which allowed for further modulation. To realise this on the clavichord, it became necessary to free up the typical seventeenth century small and fretted clavichord, so that each key obtained its own pair of strings: the unfretted clavichord was thus born. This development occurred at the end of the seventeenth century, in the environment of J. S. Bach.

¹ «Am liebsten spielte er auf dem Clavichord». JOHANN NIKOLAUS FORKEL, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, Leipzig, Hoffmeister und Kühnel, 1802; reprint ed. by Walter Vetter, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1966, p. 39. All quotations are translated by Driek Florie.

² CORNELIA AUERBACH, *Die deutsche Clavichordkunst de 18. Jahrhunderts*, PhD dissertation, Albert-Ludwig-Universität, Freiburg, 1930; reprint Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1959, pp. 18-22.

The first description of an unfretted clavichord can be found in the foreword of Johann Speth's (1664-1719) *Ars magna consoni et dissoni*, published in 1693. It was one of the very first prints of keyboard music released in Germany. In a foreword, Speth clearly describes the unfretted clavichord in which «every note has his own string, rather than 2, 3 or 4 notes for one string».³ One might suppose that the unfretted clavichord would have been manufactured several years before a composer would recommend it for the performance of his works.

An acquaintance of Johann Speth in Augsburg was Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer (1656-1746).⁴ According to a letter from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach addressed to Forkel,⁵ the young J. S. Bach would have studied and loved the works of Fischer,⁶ which were in Johann Christoph Bach's possession during his time in Ohrdruf (see Fig. 1). Moreover, the *20 Präludien und Fugen in Ariadne Musica* by Fischer, published in 1702, are considered to have served as a model for J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (WTC).⁷ Ferdinand Fischer also recommended a *clavichordium*⁸ for his *Musicalisches Blumen-Büschlein*, dated 1698, but without any specification about it being fretted or unfretted.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola report in the *Necrology* (1754) on the extensive music collection (*Moonlight*-manuscripts) of Johann Christoph Bach with works by Fischer and maybe also by Speth, who published his work at the same printing house in Augsburg. This should mean that already at a very early stage, J. S. Bach would have been aware of the above-mentioned editions and consequently of the “new” unfretted clavichord which was in use from around 1700.

³ JOHANNES SPETH, *Ars magna Consoni et Dissoni in vireto hoc Organico-Instrumentali Musico, vere et practice ab Oculis posita*, Augsburg, [s.e.], 1693, foreword in original score.

⁴ RUDOLF WALTHER, *Fischer, Johann Caspar Ferdinand*, in *Die Musik und Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. by Ludwig Finscher, Bärenreiter, Kassel, 2001², VI, coll. 1250-1256.

⁵ *Bach-Dokumente III. Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs 1750-1800*, ed. by Hans-Joachim Schulze, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1972, p. 288, doc. 803. In 1775, C. Ph. E. Bach answered a list of questions from Forkel concerning his planned biography of J. S. Bach. Forkel's letter is lost.

⁶ «hat er die Wercke von [...] dem Badenschen Capellmeister Fischer [...] geliebt u. studirt [sic]». *Bach-Dokumente III*, cit., p. 288.

⁷ DAVID LEDBETTER, *Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier". The 48 Preludes and Fugues*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 44.

⁸ «eine etwas stillere Music, und gegenwärtige allein auf das Clavichordium, oder Instrument eingerichte Parthyen». Foreword in original score: JOANNEM CASPARUM FERDINANDUM FISCHER, *Musicalisches Blumen-Büschlein oder neu eingerichtes Schag-Wercklein*, op. II, [s.e.], Augsburg, 1698, foreword.

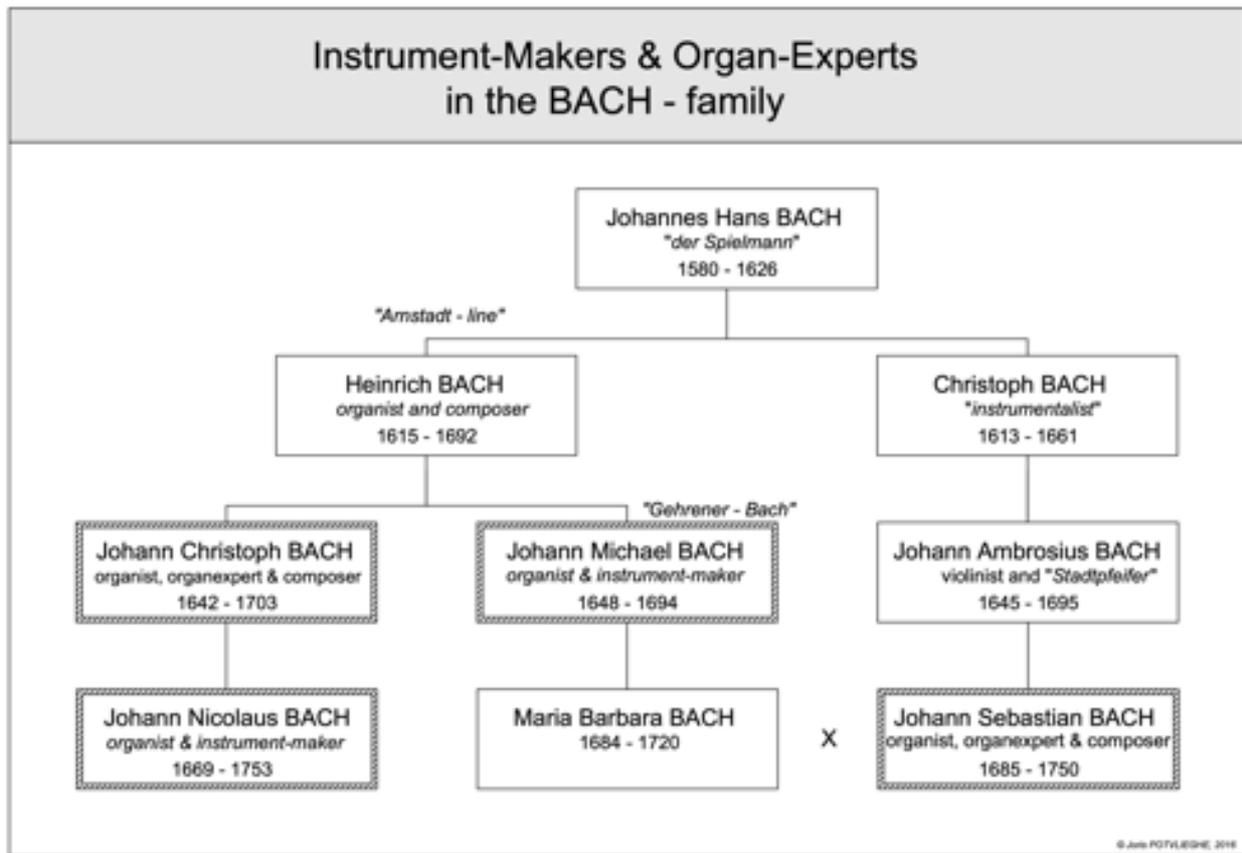


Fig. 1: Genealogy of the Bach family (shaded frames indicate the instrument makers and organ consultants).⁹

Johann Mattheson: «Most Purely on a Good Clavichord», 1713

The last decade of the seventeenth century was an important pivotal moment for the clavichord. Already preferred by Johann Jacob Froberger, Johann Krieger, and Johann Kuhnau for its expressive qualities, the clavichord progressively transcended its primary function as a practice instrument for the organist.

The clavichord evolved into an independent keyboard instrument for which composers wrote and published music. Not only in the surroundings of the young J. S. Bach (Thuringia and Saxony), but also in the north of Germany, the status of the clavichord was growing steadily and was praised for its expressive qualities. None other than Johann Mattheson, an important music critic, theorist, and composer in Hamburg, wrote already in 1713:

⁹ Published in JORIS POTVLIËGHE, *The Clavichord in the Life of J. S. Bach*, «Clavichord International», XX, 2 (2016), pp. 41-49.

Overtures, sonatas, toccatas, suites, etc. are best and most purely performed on a good clavichord, on which one can render the singing style much more clearly than on the harpsichords and spinets, which always have the same strong volume.¹⁰

This reminds us of the Inventions and Sinfonias (1723) by J. S. Bach, which he dedicates to those who «love the Clavier [...] most of all to acquire a cantabile style of playing».¹¹ For this cantabile or “singing” performance-style, the clavichord is most capable, according to Mattheson. Johann Kuhnau, the Thomascantor who preceded Bach in Leipzig, was of the same opinion, as is made clear in a letter dated December 8th, 1717 and published by Mattheson in his *Critica Musica* in 1725.

Surviving Unfretted Clavichords

An unfretted clavichord from the period of Mattheson’s *Das neu eröffnete Orchester* (1713) is the oldest preserved clavichord with an inscription of name and year. It was built by Johann Michael Heinitz in 1716 with a compass from C – d^{'''}. There is no indication that this instrument was an early experimental clavichord like the unfretted Fleischer clavichord with a fretted keyboard layout. On the contrary, it is a mature unfretted clavichord with a lot of features resembling later Saxon clavichords, such as a wide hitchpin rail, a “walking-stick” shaped bridge (still not comparable to the tuning bloc like on later Saxon clavichords), and a straight tangent line.

Another early unfretted clavichord, mentioned above, was made by Johann Christoph Fleischer in 1723. The dimensions of the case (6 feet long) are rather large for this period as is the extended compass from FF to d^{'''}. Typical for North German clavichords is the added 4-foot string in the bass. Johann Christoph Fleischer is considered to be the inventor of the lute harpsichord (*Lautenwerck*). Johann Nicolaus Bach – Johann Sebastian’s nephew – who lived in Jena, also built lute harpsichords. There are speculations about connections between J. S. Bach and Fleischer during the former visit in Northern Germany. It is plausible that J. S. Bach transferred information about clavichords and lute harpsichords from North Germany to Jena and that Nicolaus Bach then finally built a lute harpsichord there for Ernst August, duke of Weimar, for whom J. S. Bach worked as *Concertmeister*.

¹⁰ «Ouverturen, Sonaten, Toccaten, Suiten, &c. werden am besten und reinlichsten auff einem guten Clavicordio herausgebracht als woselbst man die Sing-Art viel deutlicher mit Aushalten und adouciren ausdrücken kan denn auff den allezeit gleich starck nach-klingenden Flügeln und Epinetten». JOHANN MATTHESON, *Das neu eröffnete Orchester*, Hamburg, Schiller, 1713, p. 263.

¹¹ «Auffrichtige Anleitung Wormit Denen Liebhabern des Clavires [...] am allermeisten aber eine cantable Art im Spielen zu erlangen», *Ibid.*

In Scandinavia the development to unfretted clavichords similarly started in the early eighteenth century as revealed by the preserved unfretted clavichord of Johann Petter Roos from Stockholm, built in 1726 with a compass of GG to c^{'''}. This instrument strongly resembles aspects of the North-German clavichord school. Philipp Jacob Specken, who seems to have been a pupil of Gottfried Silbermann, moved from Saxony to Stockholm (Sweden) in the 1720s and an important unfretted clavichord from 1743 has been preserved (see Fig. 2). The influence of Gottfried Silbermann in the concept of Specken is not known because none of Silbermann's clavichords have survived today, so the Specken clavichord is one of the most important early unfretted clavichords that can be linked to the period of J. S. Bach. In the *Musikinstrumenten Museum* of Markneukirchen (Germany), an unfretted clavichord is attributed to Gottfried Silbermann, but the label is disputed.



Fig. 2: Replication of Ph. J. Specken 1743, built by Joris Potvlieghe for Sir András Schiff by in 2014.

Johann Sebastian Bach and his Interest in Instrument Building

During his stay in Eisenach, the young Johann Sebastian was influenced by his great uncle Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703), who was an important organist and organ expert. This could have been the base for his lifelong interest in organ and instrument building in a more general sense. Johann Sebastian Bach supported the development of new instruments like the *Lautenwerck* and the *Viola Pomposa*. He was adequately skilled to replace the plectra of his harpsichord and to tune his clavichord in a quarter of an hour.¹² He owned Andreas Werckmeister's *Erweiterte and verbesserte Orgel-Probe* (1698), which he used as a sort of manual for organ examinations.¹³

Johann Nicolaus Bach (1669-1753), son of the Eisenacher Johann Christoph Bach, became a keyboard maker in Jena. J. S. Bach knew him already during his school days in Eisenach. The relation to this Eisenacher-Bach-tree was strong and eventually, J. S. Bach married the daughter of Johann Michael Bach, who was the brother of the famous organ expert Johann Christoph, composer and also a clavichord builder (in 1686 delivered two instruments to the councillor of Arnstadt). We must then conclude that J. S. Bach was surrounded by keyboard and organ building from his youth, including clavichord building by his father-in-law.

Johann Nicolaus Bach in the circle of the University of Jena

Johann Nicolaus Bach, who studied at the University of Jena, remained connected to the university as an organist and in this capacity taught his apprentice Jacob Adlung from 1723 to 1726. In this way, a trace arose between a member of the Bach-family and a promising organologist who would then become one of the most important of the eighteenth century. During his studies in Jena, Adlung wrote his famous *Musica Mechanica Organoedi* (1726),¹⁴ which contains the most important information about keyboard building from the beginning of the eighteenth century (see Fig. 3). It is quite obvious that a lot of knowledge would have come from the workshop of his organ tutor and keyboard maker, Johann Nicolaus Bach. His huge treatise was not released during his lifetime¹⁵ but was posthumously edited in 1768 by Johann Lorenz Albrecht, with the cooperation of Johann Friedrich Agricola, a pupil of J. S. Bach.

¹² J. N. FORKEL, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben*, cit., p. 39.

¹³ CHRISTOPH WOLFF, *The Learned Musician*, Norton, New York, 2000, p. 90.

¹⁴ JACOB ADLUNG, *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, Berlin, Friedrich Wilhelm Birnstiel, 1768.

¹⁵ Adlung wrote this treatise in 1726 and added information throughout his lifetime.

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ORGANOEDI.**

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Gründlicher Unterricht
von
der Struktur, Gebrauch und Erhaltung, u.
der Orgeln, Clavichmbel, Clavichordien
und
anderer Instrumente,
in so fern einem Organisten von solchen Sachen etwas zu wissen nöthig ist.

Vorgefasset von
M. Jakob Adlung,
weil. der Churfürstl. Würzburgischen Academie säkularer Wissenschaften in Erfurt ordentlichem Mitgliede,
des evangelischen Rathsgymnasii ordentl. Lehrer, wie auch Organisten an der evangelischen
Raths- und Predigerkirche daselbst.

Aus der hinterlassenen Handschrift des sel. Hrn. Verfassers in Ordnung gebracht,
mit einigen Anmerkungen und einer
Vorrede
in welcher,
theils von dem Leben und gelehrten Bemühungen des Hrn. Adlung überhaupt,
theils von der Ausgabe dieses Werks insbesondere, ausführliche Nachricht
ertheilet wird, versehen und zum Druck besorget
von
M. Johann Lorenz Albrecht,
kaiserl. gefeierter Dichter, Collegien der vierten Classe am Gymnasio, wie auch Cantor und Musikdirektor
bey der oberfürstlichen Hauptkirche, Besatz Mariae Virginis, zu Wühlbäumen in Thüringen,
und der hochlöbl. deutschen Gesellschaft zu Altdorf Ehrenmitglied.

Nebst vielen Figuren.

Zweiter Band.

Berlin,
gedruckt und verlegt von Friedrich Wilhelm Birnstiel, Königl. privil. Buchdrucker,
1768.

Fig. 3: Frontpage of Jacob Adlung's Musica Mechanica Organoedi, 1768.

The fact that it was published so much later may well explain the current general mis-conception about its chronology in relation to the importance of the clavichord during the time of J. S. Bach. *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, indeed, extensively covers organ building and also contains an elaborate description of making keyboard instruments and represents a *status quo* for that period: about twenty pages are consecrated to the clavichord, well informing us about the instruments that would have been familiar to J. S. Bach in the 1720s (see Fig. 4).

Moreover, during the same time Jacob Adlung was at Jena University, the lexicographer Johann Gottfried Walther published the first German *Musicalisches Lexicon* in 1732. Walther was a distant cousin of J. S. Bach and the organ teacher of the Duke in Weimar, where J. S. Bach was *Concertmeister*.

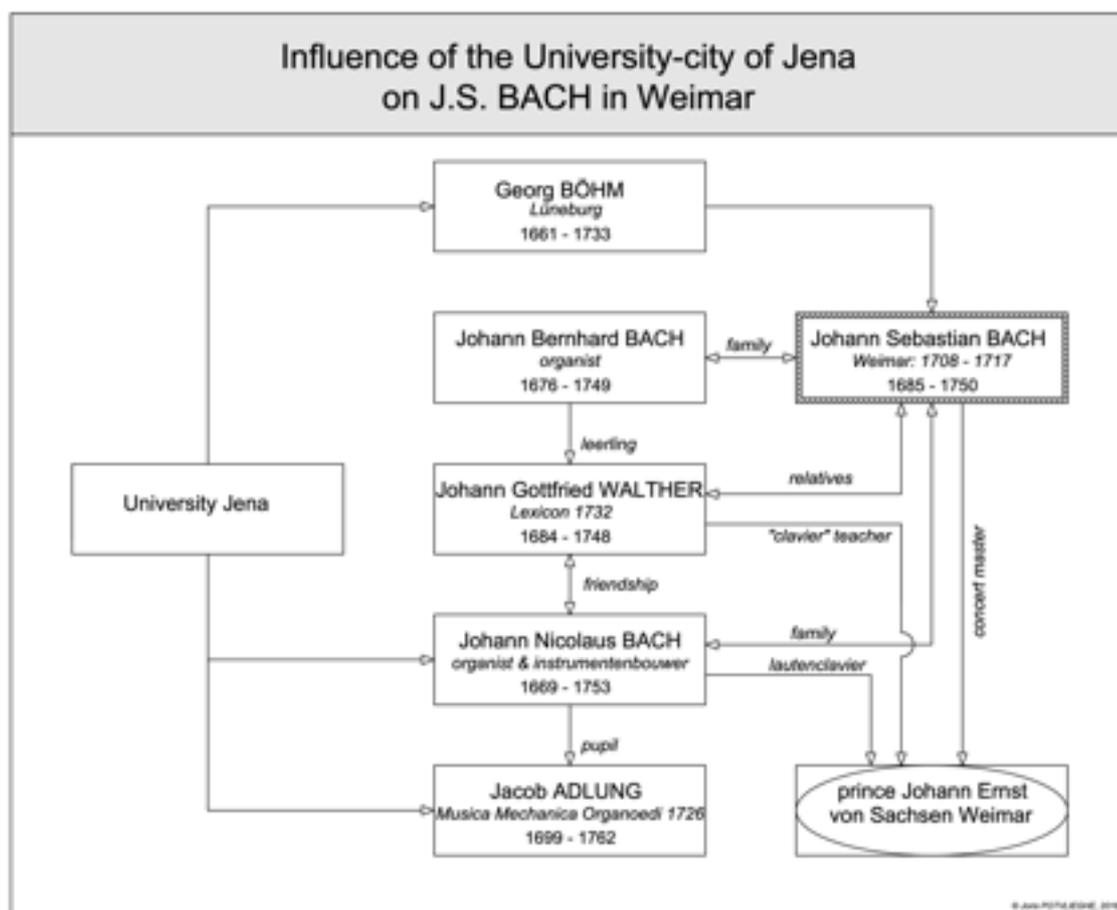


Fig. 4: Musicians, instrument makers, and music writers directly or indirectly connected to the University of Jena and to J. S. Bach.¹⁶

¹⁶ Published in J. POTVLIEGHE, *The Clavichord in the Life of J.S. Bach*, cit., pp. 41-49.

Johann George Neidhardt and Tuning Temperaments

Another intriguing person is Johann George Neidhardt (1680-1739), a pupil of Jacob Adlung who in 1706 published his *Temperatur des Monochordi* in Jena. In this treatise he advocates a tuning system in which fifths are 1/12 narrower and he introduces the term «gleich-schwebend» (equal beating).¹⁷ Concerning its temperament, Neidhardt also refers to Werckmeister, who dedicated a paragraph of his treatise *General-bass* (1698) to tuning a keyboard (*Kurzen Unterricht, wie man durch Anweisung des Monochordi ein Clavier [...] wohltemperiert stimmen könne*): «All fifths can be tuned down by a 1/12 comma [...] so that it is possible to play the entire keyboard [...] in all tonalities».¹⁸ Werckmeister, indeed, explains in his treatise¹⁹ how to tune common and «bindfreyen Clavichordia», which are still diatonically fretted (as Adlung clarified),²⁰ in contrast to the «völlig bundfrey», which means chromatically free. With this regard, in his *Musikalische Paradoxal-Discourse*, published in 1707 a year after his death, Werckmeister wrote:

We know that a temperament in which all fifths are 1/12 comma narrowed... and an accurate ear can achieve and tune this, than we will get a *wohl temperierte Harmonia* (well-tempered harmony) in the whole circle (of fifths) and in all tonalities.²¹

Werckmeister thus draws special attention to the difficulty of this kind of tuning and it is interesting to notice that Barthold Fritz (1697-1766), a well-known clavichord builder in Braunschweig, does the same in his 1756 treatise about tuning. Fritz writes that «Anweisung wie man Claviere, Clavecins, und Orgeln... in allen zwölf Tönen gleich rein stimmen könne»,²² and he describes different kinds of purity, which can be too small, exact, or too wide without the ear really hearing a beating. When one tunes all fifths slightly too small, it results in an equal temperament.²³

¹⁷ WILLEM KROESBERGEN, *18th Century Quotations Related to J.S. Bach's Temperament*, [s.e.], Cape Town, October 2015, https://www.huygens-fokker.org/docs/Kroesbergen_Bach_Temperament.pdf, p. 24 (last accessed August 29, 2023).

¹⁸ Quoted by W. KROESBERGEN, *18th Century Quotations Related to J. S. Bach's Temperament*, cit., p. 22.

¹⁹ ANDREAS WERCKMEISTER, *Die nothwendigsten Anmerckungen und Regeln des General-Bass*, Aschersleben, Gottlob Ernst Struntz, 1698, https://www.musicologie.org/Biographies/w/werckmeister_andreas.html (last accessed October 29, 2023).

²⁰ J. ADLUNG, *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, cit., p. 568.

²¹ ANDREAS WERCKMEISTER, *Musikalische Paradoxal-Discourse*, Quedlinburg, [s.e.], 1707. Translation by W. Kroesbergen.

²² BARTHOLD FRITZ, *Anweisung wie man Claviere, Clavecins, und Orgeln nach einer mechanischen Art in allen zwölf Tönen gleich rein stimmen könne*, Leipzig, Breitkopf, 1757.

²³ W. KROESBERGEN, *18th Century Quotations Related to J. S. Bach's Temperament*, cit., p. 33.

Achieving this kind of tuning on a fretted clavichord is very difficult since the bindings, which are fixed in the lay-out of the fretted clavichord, are hard to adjust so precisely. But the idea of making a clavichord unfretted became more and more necessary, so that the clavichord would become a “well-tempered clavier”.

Das Wohltemperierte Clavier

Of course, now we are very close to Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Let’s have a look what Forkel communicates about this:

Before him, and still even in his youthful years, it was customary to play more harmonically than melodically, and not yet in all 24 keys. Because the Clavier was still fretted, which means that several keys were bound together, striking one common string(choir), it could not yet be tempered purely; thus only those keys which allowed for pure tuning were played.²⁴

The natural way in which Forkel combined the tuning system with the development of the clavichord is striking, as is the evidence for playing the WTC on the clavichord, so that it seems that it was unnecessary to defend it at that time. As known, the WTC is generally seen as didactical work, as J. S. Bach explains in his foreword, for «the musical youth who are eager to learn». When it comes to Bach, however, there is always more to uncover – the WTC also concerns tuning.

But what does ‘Clavier’ mean? One can understand it in a general or more specific manner. What can we find in eighteenth-century sources? Adlung gives us an explanation in his *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit* from 1758: «Although the word Clavier has a general meaning, at the first place one understands it as a Clavichord».²⁵ From this point of view, it is tempting to see the WTC as a demonstration of the new “modern” unfretted clavichord which can be tuned “Wohltemperiert” to allow it to be played in all keys. In other words, “Wohltemperiert” concerns more than just the temperament, it also describes a new kind of *Clavier* or *Clavichord* that could finally be tuned and played in all keys, which was not possible before. When Bach meant the harpsichord, he clearly used the noun *cembalo* or *clavicembalo* as he did for the *Clavier-Übung II* and *IV*.

²⁴ «Vor ihm und noch in seinen Jugendjahren, wurde mehr harmonisch als melodisch, auch noch nicht in allen 24 Tonarten gespielt. Weil das Clavier noch gebunden war, so daß mehrere Tasten unter eine einzige Saite schlugen, so konnte es noch nicht rein temperirt werden; man spielte also nur aus solchen Tonarten, die sich am reinsten stimmen ließen», J. N. FORKEL, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben*, cit., p. 35.

²⁵ JACOB ADLUNG, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit*, Erfurt, Jungnicol, 1758, p. 568, par. 254; reprint in *Documenta Musicologica*, ed. by Hans Joachim Moser, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1953, IV, p. 568.

In this context we have to pay attention to translations in the eighteenth century. Were some editors a bit careless? Or maybe Germans thought that the noun clavichord was not in use in other countries. On the frontispiece of Johann Krieger's *Sechs Musicalische Partien* (1697) the noun *Clavichordium* was translated *Clavecin* (see Fig. 5).²⁶ So, when a German composer/editor uses the French word 'clavecin', we have to be careful.

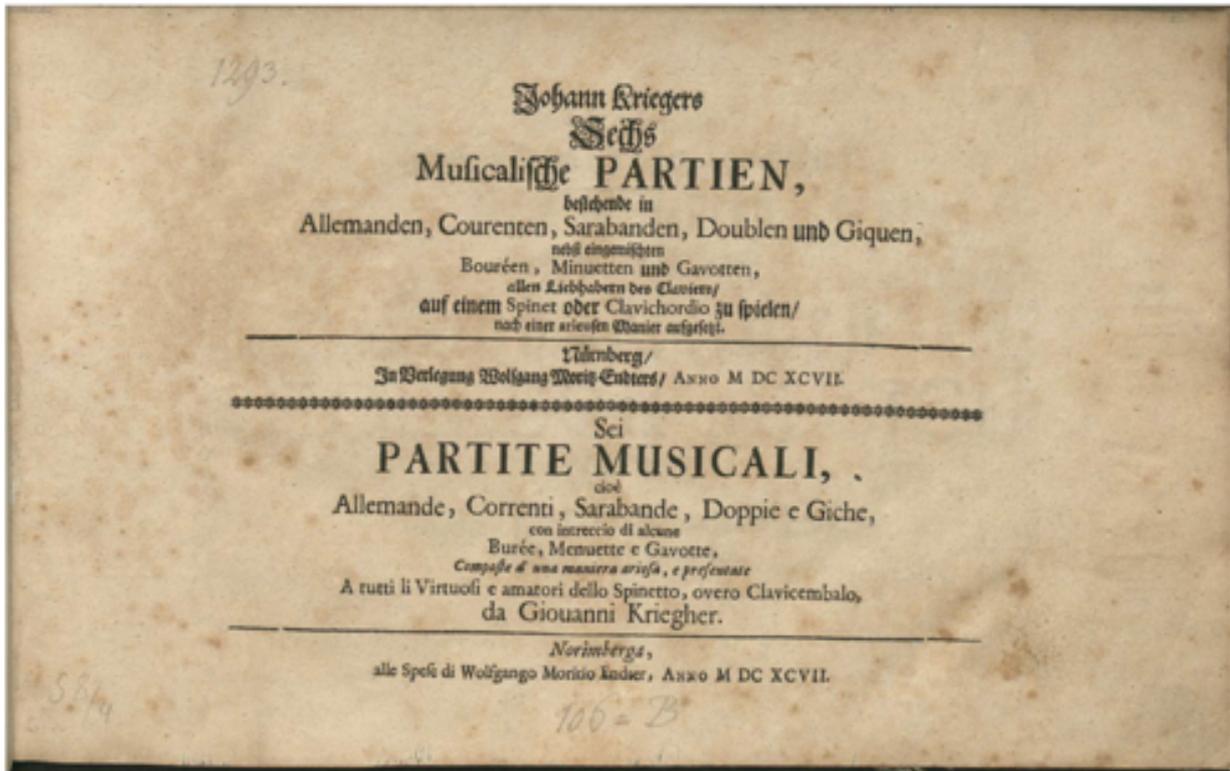


Fig. 5: Bilingual frontispiece of Johann Krieger's *Musicalische Partien*, 1697.

Different Types of Keyboards and Specific Uses

Some eighteenth-century frontispieces mention the different types of keyboard instruments, possibly for commercial reasons.²⁷ This indicates that one could freely choose a type of keyboard instrument. The quality of Bach's music allows it to be played on different (keyboard) instruments, but what was common at that time? Was there a more specific attribution to one keyboard instrument, and if so, why?

²⁶ JOHANN KRIEGER, *Musikalische Partien*, Nürnberg, Wolfgang Moritz Endter, 1697.

²⁷ GEORG ANDREAS SORGE, *ClavierUbung in sich haltend das andere halbe Duztend von 24 melodieusen, vollstimmigen u. nach modernem Gustu durch den ganzen Circulum Modorum Musicorum gesetzten Praeludiis, welches sich so wohl auf der Orgel, als auch auf dem Clavicymbel u. Clavicordio mit Vergnügen hören lassen*, Nüremberg – Balth, Schmidt, 1739-1742.

We find an interesting guideline about the use of different types of keyboard instruments in C. Ph. E. Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen*, which was published three years after his father's passing:

Among the many kinds of keyboard instruments [...] there are mainly two kinds, namely the harpsichord and the clavichord, which have so far received the most acclaim. The first is more generally used for strong music, the second for playing alone.²⁸

The determination «zu starcken Musicken» (strong music) has to be interpreted as «music scored for ensembles» in which the harpsichord has an accompanying or solo function. The clavichord on the other hand was used «zum allein spielen» (to play alone).

In this context, the preface to the WTC, written by J. S. Bach himself, gains a new dimension:

The Well-Tempered Clavier. For the benefit and use of the musical youth who are eager to learn, as well as a particular pastime to those who are already competent in this study, composed and released by Johann Sebastian Bach.²⁹

J. S. Bach indicates that these compositions are in the first place written for personal use and musical contemplation, «to be played alone». It was not «concert music» as it would later become in the twentieth century.

An eyewitness report on the use of a clavichord by J. S. Bach in his domestic environment is given by Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720-1774), who studied at the University of Leipzig and was Bach's private student from 1738 to 1740:

Why rather, does the writer not mention instead the still much more difficult 6 Violin-solos without bass by Joh. Seb. Bach? Their composer [Johann Sebastian Bach] often played them himself on the clavichordio, adding as much harmony as he found necessary.³⁰

²⁸ «Man hat ausser vielen Arten der Claviere, [...] hauptsächlich zwey Arten, nemlich die Flügel und Clavicorde, welche bis hieher den meisten Beyfall erhalten haben. Jene braucht man insgemein zu starcken Musicken, diese zum allein spielen», CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH, *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen*, Berlin, George Ludewig Winter, 1753, I, p. 8, par. 11.

²⁹ «Das wohl temperirte Clavier. Zum Nutzen und Gebrauch der Lehr-begierigen Musicalischen Jugend, als auch derer in diesem studio schon habil seyenden besonderem ZeitVertreib auffgesetzt und verfertigt von Johann Sebastian Bach», *Bach-Dokumente I. Schriftstücke von der Hand Johann Sebastian Bachs*, ed. by Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1963, p. 219, doc. 152.

³⁰ «Warum führt der V. nicht 12minuten die noch viel schwerern 6 Violinsolos ohne baß von Hrn Joh. Seb. Bach an? [...] Ihr Verfasser spielte sie selbst oft auf dem Clavichorde, und fügte von Harmonie so viel dazu bey, als er für nöthig befand», *Bach-Dokumente III*, cit., p. 293, doc. 808, pp. 240-241. The context is Agricola's 1775 discussion of *Vermischten Musikalien* (Riga, 1773) by Johann Friedrich Reichardt.

The Use of the Noun Clavier by J. S. Bach and his Environment

Agricola seems to have used the word *clavichordio* while J. S. Bach did not. Strangely enough, this clavichord is not mentioned in the estate of J. S. Bach.³¹ The curator also recorded several «Clavesin», a «Lauten Werck» and a «Spinettgen». Furthermore, «3. Clavire nebs Pedal» came into question. These «3 Clavire» were already given to Johann Christian Bach before his father died. A very important point is the record of the name «Clavire» beside the «Clavesin» and «Spinet». If the «3 Clavire» were harpsichords or spinets, the curator should have listed them with their specific nouns, as mentioned above. With «3 Clavire», the curator meant another kind of keyboard instrument: a «Clavier» should have been a clavichord and this seems to have been the common use in the Bach-family, as evident in the discussion among the children.

The word 'Clavier' for a clavichord is used in a distinctive way compared to 'Flügel' for a harpsichord. Above all, it is obvious that J. S. Bach owned a (Pedal) clavichord. The ownership of a pedal clavichord becomes clearer when Forkel writes that Bach could easily play a trio or quartet from a single bass line: «for that kind of art he served himself of two *Claviere* with the Pedals, or of a double-manual harpsichord provided with a pedal».³²

Moreover, concerning the use of the word 'Clavier', Carl Philipp Emanuel too wrote a piece for clavichord when he departed from his beloved and acclaimed Silbermann-clavichord: his famous *Abschied von meinem Silbermannischen Claviere*.³³ So, despite the noun 'Clavichord' did not appear in Bach's letters or compositions, this was most important and well-known keyboard instrument during his time, as it turns out in the lexicon of his nephew Johann Gottfried Walther (1732): «This very well-known instrument is, so to speak, the first *grammatica* for all keyboard players» (Fig. 6).³⁴

³¹ *Bach-Dokumente II. Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1685-1750*, ed. by Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1969, p. 492, doc. 627.

³² J. N. FORKEL, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben*, p. 39. See also JOEL SPEERSTRA, *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord. An Organist's Guide*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2004, p. 25.

³³ CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH, *Abschied von meinem Silbermannischen Claviere*, 1781, Wq. 66.

³⁴ «Dieses sehr bekannte Instrument, ist, so zu reden aller Spieler erste Grammatica», JOHANN GOTTFRIED WALTHER, *Musikalisches Lexicon*, Leipzig, [please complete publisher](#), 1732, p. 169; reprint in *Documenta Musicologica*, ed. by Richard Schaal, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1953, III, pp. XXXX.



Fig. 6: J. G. Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732).

Adlung wrote something similar in his *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit*:

For learning, the clavichord is the best keyboard instrument; yes also to play, when someone wants to express the ornaments and affects [...]. It is not necessary to put a description of it here, since every child knows these instruments.³⁵

In brief, if the clavichord was such a well-known instrument during Bach's time, it would be very strange if this instrument didn't appear in any writings by J. S. Bach or his family. One can thus conclude that they used the word 'Clavier' for the clavichord, as is evident in Adlung's explanation.³⁶

J. S. Bach as a Clavichord Player

Could Forkel's statement about J. S. Bach's preference for the clavichord be a rendition of his personal ideas? The following testimony of Jean-Baptiste Grosier

³⁵ «Zum Lernen ist ein Clavichord das beste Clavier; ja auch zum Spielen, wenn jemand die Manieren nebst dem Affecte recht vorstellen will. [...] Bey der Lehre soll billig ein Clavichordien-Pedal darunter gestellt **14minen**. Eine Beschreibung davon herzusetzen ist nicht nöthig, weil alle Kinder solch Instrument kennen», J. ADLUNG, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit*, cit., p. 568; reprint in *Documenta Musicologica*, cit., IV, p. 568, par. 254.

³⁶ J. ADLUNG, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit*, p. 568, par. 254; reprint in *Documenta Musicologica*, cit., IV, p. 568.

(1743-1823) is an ode to the clavichord and an important evidence for J. S. Bach as a clavichord player.³⁷ It appeared in the «Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts» in 1780, where Grosier published as a critic on the new issued *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* by Jean-Benjamin de La Borde (1734-1794), in which the clavichord was briefly mentioned

I would like that M.D.L.B. (Mr. de La Borde) spread the benefits of the Manicorde or Clavicorde (he had to say Clavicorde). This instrument, too little known in France, makes the delight of the foreigners who see it as the instrument of excellence for the Master. We will not judge the effects of the Clavichord, like those of the other instruments. They are surprising, when played by a competent Artist, while only a muted and monotone sound is acquired under less exercised hands. It unifies all the perfections of the Forte-Piano, and has not his inconveniences. In one word, it is an instrument most perfidious for the charlatans, and more favorable for the real talents. One can develop the most wonderful lightness on it as well as the most wonderful expression; but then he should possess one thing or another on an eminent level. On this occasion I remember an anecdote of which I never believed to be in an opportunity to make use of it.

A celebrated composer from Italy went to Germany, but he was prejudiced against the clavichord, which he regarded as an imperfect instrument that was only held onto out of habit. One of his countrymen who had been living in Germany for many years, took him to a great Master (Sebast. Bach, father of all Bachs, as I remember well). Already astonished by the preludes (improvisations) of this most able Professor on the clavichord, he was brought to tears by an adagio that followed, hardly able to contain himself till the end of the piece, where upon he embraced the Artist, crying out: this is the King of all instruments.³⁸

³⁷ JEAN-BAPTISTE GROSIER, *Journal de Littérature, des sciences et des arts*, Paris, 1780, III, pp.174-175.

³⁸ Original text: «J'aurois voulu que M.D.L.B. (Monsieur de La Borde) s'étendît davantage sur le Manicorde ou Claricorde (il faut dire Clavicorde). Cet instrument, trop peu connu en France, fait les délices des étrangers qui le 15minent1515 comme l'instrument de Maîtres par excellence. On ne doit point juger des effets du Clavicorde, comme de ceux de tout autre instrument. Ils sont surprenans, quand il est touché par un Artiste habile, tandis qu'il ne rend qu'un son sourd & monotone sous des mains peu exercées à en jouer. Il réunit toutes les perfections du Forte-Piano, & n'en a point les inconvéniens. En un mot, il n'est point d'instrument à touches plus perfide pour les charlatans, & plus favorable aux talens 15mine. On peut y 15minent15 la plus grande légéreté comme la plus grande expression ; mais alors il faut posséder l'une & l'autre dans un degré 15minent. A cette occasion je me rappelle une anecdote j je n'ai jamais cru être dans le cas de faire usage. Un célèbre Compositeur d'Italie vint en Allemagne, prévenu contre le Clavichorde, qu'il regardoit comme un instrument imparfait que l'on conservoit encore par habitude. Un de ses Compatriotes qui habitoit ce pays depuis long-temps, le conduisit chez un grand Maître (Sébast. Bach, père de tous les Bachs, autant que je puis me rappeler). Déjà étonné par les préludes de cet habile Professeur sur le Clavichorde, il fut attendri aux larmes par un adagio qui les suivit, attendit à peine la fin du morceau pour se jeter au cou de l'Artiste, & s'écria: "c'est le Roi des instruments"». The commentary is from the literary critic ABBOT JEAN BAPTISTE GROSIER, *Essay sur la musique ancienne et modern* (1780), *Manicorde, Claricorde ou Manicordion*, I, p. 301. See also JEAN-MARC BAFFERT, *Vier unbekannte Bach-Erwähnungen in Druckschriften des 18. Jahrhunderts*, «Bach-Jahrbuch», LXXIV (1988), p. 191, as quoted by D. LEDBETTER, *Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier"*, cit., p. 346.

The recognition of the expressive qualities of the clavichord can also be found among other Bach's contemporaries Bach. No other than the Leipzig Thomascantor Kuhnau (1660-1722) wrote in a letter (1717) to Mattheson:

I likewise did whatever was in my power on the Clavicordio, and was already of the same opinion as [stated in] the Orchester [*Das neu eröffnet Orchester* by Johann Mattheson, 1713], that this instrument, quiet though it may be, offers the best service to exercise the best possible expression of harmony on any keyboard instrument.³⁹

When Mattheson published this letter in 1725, he added the following critical remark in a footnote: «It should be marked, by those who favour quilled instruments above the clavichord». About a century later, Forkel wrote almost the same about Bach:

He [Bach] consider the clavichord the best instrument to study, and moreover for private musical entertainment. He found it the best able to express his most refined thoughts, and did not believe that on any harpsichord or pianoforte one could obtain such a diversity in the nuances of tone, as on this poor-in-tone, but in its small scale extraordinarily flexible instrument.⁴⁰

This statement strongly elevates the clavichord above the harpsichord and piano, which in the twentieth century provoked a kind of opposition to the clavichord. Can we suspect Forkel of a personal representation? Was Forkel really a “defender” of the clavichord and not concerned about honesty when writing the first biography of Bach? Miklos Spanyi words it as follows:

Forkel was a strict Bachist (like Kirnberger) who tried to preserve the best of the Bach tradition and acted according to it. His attitude did not allow the inclusion of entirely invented opinions in his book. Forkel's Bach biography is one of the most important documents of the strong Bach traditions ranging from J. S. Bach to the late nineteenth century.⁴¹

When looking more closely at Forkel's opinion at the time, we discover that his assumed preference for which he was criticized in the twentieth century was in fact not nuanced enough for some of his contemporaries. In a certain way, this can prove the objectivity of Forkel and acquit him of the accusation that he was a proponent of the clavichord. None other than Karl Friederich Zelter, the famous tutor of Felix Mendelssohn

³⁹ JOHANN MATTHESON, *Critica Musica*, Hamburg, publisher?, 1725, II, par. 26, p. 237.

⁴⁰ J. N. FORKEL, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben*, cit., p. 39.

⁴¹ GREGORY CROWELL, *Miklos Spanyi on Performing Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" Book I*, «Clavichord International», XX, 1 (2016), pp. 2-7.

Bartholdy, disagreed with Forkel's statement about the clavichord being «poor in ton» (Ton-arm). In a first draft letter from 1803 Zelter nuances it as follow:

A poor in tone instrument: one can be amazed, that such a small instrument could be so sonorous, can play such cantabile and exalted pieces with impressive character, so that an adagio by Emanuel Bach and the *Chromatische Fantasie* by his father [BWV 903] so truly can be performed on it. Consequently, one should say that the clavichord is rather tender, but not poor in tone.⁴²

In his definitive version Zelter added:

the pianoforte is louder than the clavichord and the organ is still louder but the clavichord is a very particular instrument on which the richest, strongest, deepest, and most genius [ideas] can be expressed and for that, as you said [he addresses to Forkel], the old Bach so gladly played the clavichord.⁴³

Conclusion

Did Forkel exaggerate with his assertion that Bach loved the clavichord above all, as contested at the beginning of the twentieth century? Many sources, from the beginning to the end of the eighteenth century, confirm the status of the clavichord as a highly appreciated and beloved keyboard instrument. The evidence of Bach's use and possession of clavichords is provided by his students and estate. He himself expressed neither personal preference for the harpsichord nor an appreciation for one specific harpsichord or clavichord builder. As is the case for much of his biography, a reconstruction of the context is required to gain a wider perspective and with this in mind, Forkel's statement does not seem at all peculiar.

NOTE

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⁴² *Bach-Dokumente IV. Bilddokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs*, ed. by Werner Neumann, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1979, p. 153, doc. D3.

⁴³ *Bach-Dokumente IV*, cit., p. 195, doc. D5.