

Johann Christian Bach: His Life, the Essence of His Keyboard Works and His Five Berlin Concertos, P. 390

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Abstract

Johann Christian Bach, later widely known as John Christian, was the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach and his second wife, Anna Magdalena. Born in Leipzig, Kingdom of Saxony on 5 September 1735, John Christian Bach received high reputation as a keyboard performer as well as a teacher. His keyboard works, in the early years, were mostly composed for his students and amateurs. He composed six keyboard solo sonatas, Op. 5 for harpsichord in 1766, four years after arriving in London. Later in 1776, he published a set of six sonatas, Op. 17 for either harpsichord or pianoforte. Some of the sonatas in Op.5 illustrated elements of Classicism and galant style with the use of Alberti basses, arpeggios, and scale passages while the later set, Op. 17, with the influence of pianoforte, displayed the wider dynamic range and flexibility of tone colors. Another significant contribution for keyboard repertoire were sets of concertos. Johann Christian Bach's Five Berlin Concertos, P. 390 displayed his early ideas about the keyboard concerto. With Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's influence, all of the five Berlin concertos are large-scale works with unique harmony, abrupt pauses, and big contrasts in melodic passages. His concertos and keyboard sonatas are crucial since they represent the elements of Classical style which later on has been a great influence in W.A. Mozart's music.

Keywords: Johann Christian Bach, Keyboard Sonatas, Berlin Concertos

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Introduction

Less than a decade after Johann Sebastian Bach's death, when people talked about "famous Bach," they did not mean the cantor of St. Thomas Church in Leipzig; he had been virtually forgotten by then. Most likely they were referring to Johann Christian Bach, Sebastian's youngest son. Yet historians have paid less attention to Johann Christian (later widely known as John Christian) than to his half-brothers Wilhem Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel or to his brother Johann Christoph Friedrich, the "Buckeburg Bach"²

Born in Leipzig, Kingdom of Saxony on 5 September 1735, the youngest son of Sebastian and his second wife, Anna Magdalena, Johann Christian Bach received his early musical education at the age of eight. "Undoubtedly the son benefited from his father's rigorous instruction, in fact, Christian inherited three keyboard instruments from his devoted father, which must have given him a good start on his road to success as a clavier virtuoso."³ "Christian, as youth, was already able to amaze the public with his masterful performances at the keyboard."⁴ Naturally, "Christian [became] the apple of Sebastian's eye and his favorite pupil."⁵

Besides gaining instructions at home, the young Christian was brought to many musical events, such as church performances and the concerts performed by Collegium Musicum. Evidently, Christian grew up in musical environments, such manifold musical impressions imprinted on his mind so strongly that they inspired him to be a successful musician. As a matter of fact, Christian's talent was noticed at the age of thirteen-year-old when he took the polonaise from his father's Orchestral Suite in B minor and transposed it to D minor for clavier.

After his father's death in 1750, at the age of fifteen-year-old, Christian left Leipzig and moved to Berlin in the company of his brother, Friedemann; there he lived with Emanuel. By the time he arrived in Berlin, the city's musical life was so bustling that many musicians and artists made their living and expressed their arts freely. As a newcomer, Christian was no stranger to Berlin, he knew some of Sebastian's students who were mostly important court musicians; hence, he was able to adjust and be familiar with the new environment easily. "[H] is friendly, outgoing personality no doubt helped him make new acquaintances quickly."⁶

² Heinz Gärtner, *John Christian Bach: Mozart's Friend and Mentor* (Portland: Amdeus Press, 1994), x.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., x.

⁶ Gärtner, 60.

As an eager learner, he learned to adjust his old style, the Baroque style with the new. By being exposed to the Berlin music world; there he had the opportunities to be closer to many court musicians. First the leading musician in Berlin, Johann Joachim Quantz, was the music instructor of Frederick the King and admired Sebastian Bach as the greatest organist who brought his music into perfection.⁷ Quantz wrote a treatise in 1752; in Part eighteen of his treatise, Quantz stressed the importance of good singing even in instrumental music. Young Christian had surely absorbed such thoughts from Quantz. “He may have thought of the treatise as his Bible, especially since Quantz had studied the much-touted Italian music at the source and surely spoke with authority.”⁸

In 1753, a year after Quantz treatise, Emanuel came up with his famous *The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*. Christian profited from Emanuel’s concept of playing in a singing style, also known as *cantabile* style. Indeed, as a true musician, besides studying keyboard playing and composing under Emanuel, he involved himself in musical arrangements to help Emanuel who had been too busy with the King of Prussian’s demands.⁹ Under Emanuel’s supervision, Christian’s musical style was strongly influenced by him, especially on the Berlin Concertos.

Second, Christian also came to know the Graun brothers; Johann Gottlieb Graun and youngest Carl Heinrich Graun. They completed their study in Italy and were “the stars in the Berlin musical firmament”; Carl’s strong point was opera, a popular genre during this period due to the favor of Frederick the King, whereas Johann’s forte was orchestral music. From them, [Christian had witnessed] the Italian Opera at its best, musically and visually.¹⁰ Vocal and orchestral disciplines were outstanding, while costumes, scenery, and ballet were unequalled anywhere in Europe.¹¹ These Operas directed by Graun brothers gave Christian a strong impression and profound interest in Italian music.

The open-minded Christian was paying a great interest in both Bohemian music and the musicians who came to Berlin. In this case, Gottlieb Graun played a big role in establishing strong relationships with those Bohemian musicians who were well-known as the most musical people of Europe.¹² “Specific Bohemian influences in Christian’s music are difficult to identify, but there are traces everywhere in his instrumental music, in expressive, songlike passages

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 67, 74.

¹¹ Gärtner, 68.

¹² Ibid., 75.

that occur in both slow and fast movements. Berlin and Bohemia were important to Christian's career in more ways than one."¹³ During his stay in Berlin in 1750-1754, Christian composed several keyboard pieces and concertos. Mostly they are influenced by Emanuel's style particularly the Berlin Concerto, P. 390.

Having a desire to further his study in Italy, Christian went to Italy and studied under Padre Martini. There, he composed some liturgical works. Soon, he worked for a patron, Count Agostino Litta in Milan. Under both Martini and Litta, Christian's career was directed toward church music. In a short time, he had completely become Italianized; he wrote and spoke Italian quite fluently. He even called himself "Giovanni" or "Milan" Bach and involved himself in religious activities. In 1757, he committed himself into the Roman Catholic faith.¹⁴ His public performances and sacred works had attracted European's attention; his works were copied and preserved in the most well-known library in Europe.

In June 1760, he was appointed as one of the two main organists at Milan Cathedral. As the organist, Christian's career was mainly focused on playing sacred music. Later on, he turned to the new genre, opera. Naples at this time was the musical centre of opera, sacred music, with the rise of best singers and musicians. He wrote his first opera in December 1760. Then he was commissioned to write an opera for Naples, *Artaserse* which was performed on 4 November 1761;¹⁵ It was a great success and proved to be a favorable opera. The second opera was written to celebrate King of Spain's birthday. It is not as successful as the first one but his name was known throughout Venice and London. As a result, he was commissioned to write operas for the King's Theatre in London to make the theatre glorious and overcome the financial difficulties. For Giovanni Bach, this was a tempting opportunity. Nevertheless, since he was under Cathedral authorities, he had to write a petition to Cathedral for a year's absence.¹⁶

Giovanni, the "adventurous" Bach continued his life journey from Italy to London. His contract with the King's Theatre was ended due to the director having appointed an anti-German composer, Giardini. Therefore it was a hard circumstance for Christian to survive, compelling him to move from London. His first two operas were not as successful. However, Naples persuaded Giovanni to return but he rejected it. He chose to reside in London and in 1763, he won Queen Charlotte's favor and patronage after successfully impressing her with his concerto, Op. 1.

Within a year, on 15 December 1763 he had the privilege to publish his works; his name

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Karl Geiringer, *The Bach Family; Seven Generations of Creative Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 406-07.

¹⁵ Christoph Wolff et al., *The New Grove Bach Family* (New York: Norton, 1985), 316.

¹⁶ Wolff, 317.

appears in the program as Mr. John Bach as how he introduced himself in England. During the first year in London, John met Carl Friedrich Abel, the composer and viola da gamba player who played a major role in London's concert life. Both of them shared the same apartment and had the same circle of friends.¹⁷ This friendship could be traced back to their boyhood in Leipzig. The first joint concert was held on 29 February 1764 in which an unidentified serenata was performed.¹⁸ Two months later, in April 1764 the eight-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his sister, Nannerl accompanied their father, Leopold Mozart, arrived in London. Young Mozart was having a chance to attend John's performance at the Buckingham House; soon young Mozart fell under his influence. "They are known to have improvised jointly at least once. No formal master-pupil relationship seems to have existed, but the charm of Bach's personality and the quality of his music clearly attracted the young Mozart."¹⁹

Due to the "London" Bach's excellent performances and his loyalty to the Queen, his social life now belonged to the nobility and aristocracy. As a musician in high demand, London Bach was socially engaged:

Bach was prodigiously active in various fields. He not only composed serious opera, but contributed to comic works performed at Covent Garden, and supplied the Vauxhall concerts with many delightful arias, which brought laurels to his favorite pupil, Mrs. Weichsell. Instrumental music was constantly composed and published by him, including clavier works, chamber music and symphonies;...In spite of all his creative and instructive activity, he was still able to devote a great deal of energy to his work as a performing artist and concert manager. In the second year of his stay in London he inaugurated, together with Carl Friedrich Abel, a subscription series of concerts that was continued up to his death.²⁰

The Bach-Abel concerts appeared as the top-rated entertainment for many years. In every season, there were fifteen concerts offered; both Bach and Abel directed the concerts in turn as conductors, soloists, and composers, involving eminent artists from various cities such as London, German and Mannheim. Ten years after his stay in London, his name was well-established throughout Europe and also Mannheim. He was requested to compose a music drama for Mannheim, a German city, in honor of the Elector's birthday.²¹ At this time, Mannheim was considered as the best musical city throughout Europe and the Mannheim

¹⁷ Geiringer, 413.

¹⁸ Wolff, 318.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Geiringer, 413.

²¹ Ibid., 413-14.

Orchestra produced the finest orchestra players, and the first-class singers under the Elector Karl Theodor. This time, the call from Mannheim to compose for the extraordinary strong musicians was like the accomplishment of his dream.

In November 1772, his opera, *Temistocle*, was performed by a brilliant cast, including the great tenor, Anton Raaf, who ten years earlier had won laurels in Naples with Bach's opera *Alessandro nell' Indie*. The artistic glamour was matched by the outward pomp necessitated by the presence of a great number of exalted personages, and the evening constituted an unforgettable event in John Bach's career. Altogether the time spent in Mannheim was a most exciting one."²²

At the same time, the bachelor John was attracted to Augusta Wendling, the young daughter of his host, who finally rejected him. After his return to London, he found Cecilia Grassi, the Italian singer whom he has known for years; finally, they were married in 1773. Cecilia was a good singer who helped her husband by teaching voice students.

A Year after the *Temistocle* premier, the opera was performed again, but due to John's busy schedule in London, he was unable to attend the performance in Mannheim. Four years later, he returned to Mannheim with his new opera, *Lucio Silla*; however, it was less successful due to the fact that German opera had become a new trend in Mannheim.

In 1778, he was commissioned to write his first French-language opera, *Amadis de Gaule*, in Paris while the war between Gluck and Piccini was at the peak. Gluck found that Bach's work was outdated as Piccini's, while Piccini thought Bach's work was too heavy and not charming at all. Various events took place that decreased his popularity, his fame soon faded. "In the field of teaching, his position at the very top of the profession had been undermined by the great Italian singer, Venanzio Rauzzini, who came to London in 1774 and drew fashionable pupils like a magnet."²³ Teaching, composing, and even the Bach-Abel performances were no longer in high demand. He was no longer at the very top; these conditions made him over-worried and consequently he suffered from serious illness. In May 1781, he appeared in public for the last concert of the season. Indeed, from day to day he grew weaker and he breathed his last on 1 January 1782 in London.²⁴

For almost twenty years, Bach composed operas, symphonies, concertos, chamber and keyboard works that bore his name in fame. Throughout his lifetime, the music of Christian Bach was similar to his brother's, Emanuel, characterized by the Viennese Classical Style. "The work of Berlin Bach made a deep impression on young Haydn, who learned from its expressive

²² Geiringer, 414.

²³ Ibid., 415.

²⁴ Ibid., 419.

subjectivity and the art to develop a theme until its possibilities were exhausted;”²⁵ the young Haydn was influenced by Christian. Christian’s music also exerted his influence on the young Mozart; the law of contrast and the approach of introducing lovely and tender melodies were rooted in Mozart’s works.

During the period of Christian’s studies with Sebastian, his style was not fully developed, nonetheless, the basic technique and the art of polyphony learned from his father became his solid foundation. When he studied with Emanuel in Berlin, his music mirrored the way Emanuel wrote a beautiful and passionate subject for clavier’s work. Thus, Christian’s works were written mostly for clavier accompanied by string instrument and larger scale concertos. There were no sonatas for solo instruments. Still, the idiomatic keyboard works held a special place in Christian’s compositions. “Throughout his time in Berlin, he was renowned for his dexterity on the harpsichord.”²⁶

The year of Italy, in 1755, was Christian’s transitional period. The romantic, deeply passionate, expressive, and soulful characteristics could be found in his early works during his stay in Italy. Later, he improved his compositional technique by studying under Padre Martini, a great Italian teacher. In addition, under Giambattista Martini of Bologna, who was a protestant organist, a violinist, mathematician, composer, music historian, and master of polyphony, Christian wrote music for Latin Church. He was then attracted by the new genre, which is opera. It was a great decision, which later made him become a successful opera composer; his five operas were performed within two years.

Out of the solid earthiness of the Bach’s, the passionate expressiveness of *Empfindsamkeit*, the playful world of make-believe of the stage, and the sweet tunefulness of Catholic Church music, the pupil of Padre Martini created a kind of music that was noble and yet light, technically competent, yet free of ponderousness.²⁷

At the age of 27, Christian’s style has transformed into its maturity, thus bringing him to England under the commission of King’s Theatre. As quoted from Geiringer, “It is not surprising that his specific brand of what we might call early classicism, with its mixture of German and Italian elements and equal accomplishments in the field of vocal and instrumental music made him one of the most successful composers of his time.”²⁸ Immediately, his works were regularly performed throughout Europe.

²⁵ Geiringer, 417.

²⁶ Stephen Roe, “The Keyboard Music of J.C. Bach,” PhD diss., (Oxford University, 1981), 2.

²⁷ Geiringer, 419.

²⁸ Geiringer, 419.

The Essence of His Keyboard Works

Although he composed different genres such as operas, liturgical works, symphonies, and chamber works, his reputation rested on that of a keyboard performer, as quoted from Plantinga, “It is clear from concert advertisements that during the 1760’s and 1770’s he was the most popular keyboard performer in London.”²⁹ Besides a famous keyboard performer, he was also a teacher. His keyboard works were mostly composed for his students and amateurs by the collection of easy pieces in the very beginning of the sonatas. During Bach’s sojourn in Berlin, he composed six keyboard solo sonatas, Op. 5 for harpsichord.

“To listen to one of John Christian Bach’s keyboard sonatas, concertos, or symphonies is to realize that here is a composer who stands at the doorstep of Classicism, for in his graceful melodies — small design, elegant, and at times tinged with melancholy — we detect the language, above all, of the young Mozart.”³⁰ The elements of Classicism and *galant* style were found in the beautiful Adagio, Op. 5 no. 2, where the singing style and cantilena were integrated by the use of alberti basses, arpeggios, and scale passages in the melancholy melodic passages. This influenced Mozart’s style, as in Example 1.

Example 1



John Christian Bach Sonata, op. 5, no. 2

Having affection of Christian’s music, Mozart arranged three of Christian’s Op. 5 sonata (number two, three, and four) on his way back from London by adding an accompaniment written for two violins and a bass (K. 107); Later, during his maturity years, Mozart had added the cadenza into these concertos.

²⁹ Leon Plantinga, *Clementi-His Life and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 36.

³⁰ Reinhard G. Pauley, *Music in the Classic Period*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 57.

Christian's keyboard sonata in E, Op.5 number 6 was categorized as his significant composition during his sojourn in Italy. It consisted of three movement; first, "Prelude", showed the influences of Emanuel's passionate expression and the North Italian violin music; moreover, "[t]he force of this grief-stricken Grave at times foreshadows Beethoven's music."³¹ Second, the "Fugue", showed the influence of Padre Martini by imposing the polyphony and contrapuntal devices mixture with his own characteristic as a creative composer by adding stretto toward the end. Third, "Gavotte", which is more in the torpid style, and was written before Bach used the bel canto style.³² The remaining five sonatas of Op.5, published in a set of "pour le clavecin ou le Piano Forte" belong to the London year.

In the early Italian period, Christian was a harpsichord player who wrote mostly keyboard works for harpsichord and clavichord, but hardly any clavier solo piece. Nevertheless, his arrival in London provided him an opportunity to try out the new instrument, pianoforte, which was quite a new instrument in London at the time. The pianoforte itself was capable of producing dynamic contrasts and shadings. It appears that London Bach was the first pianoforte public performer. Moreover, in 1776, he published his first set of sonatas designed for either harpsichord or pianoforte; this set, Op. 17, consisted of six sonatas. The new instrument, pianoforte, was capable of showing wider dynamic range and flexibility of tone colors, which has certainly affected Bach's stylistic features. Most of his keyboard sonata consist of two-movements, in the galant and lyrical style. Conversely, the three-movement sonatas were technically and musically more demanding; the c minor sonata, Op. 17 no. 2 is an effective work (Example 2).³³

³¹ Geiringer, 420.

³² Ibid., 429.

³³ Charles Sanford Terry, *John Christian Bach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 341.

Example 2

First movement



Second movement



Third movement



John Christian Bach Sonata, op. 17, no. 2

His Berlin Concertos

As a brilliant keyboard performer who possessed strong showmanship, the keyboard concertos was another preferred genre for Christian. According to Charles Sanford Terry, the author of John Christian Bach, Christian composed three sets of concerto; Op. 1, Op. 5, and Op. 17. However, this paper will only discuss his Berlin Concertos, P. 390 and the stylistic features.

In his Berlin years, 1750-1754, Christian was under Emanuel's supervision as discussed before in the previous third paragraph, It was not surprising that the presence of Emanuel's influence is apparent in the five concertos, known as the Berlin Concertos. "In the construction of the concertos, ...C.P.E. Bach's influence is paramount."³⁴ These five Berlin Concertos, P. 390 are in the key of B-flat major, F minor, D minor, E major, and G major scored for clavier, two violins, viola, and basso. All of these concertos are large-scale works as Emanuel's. There are numbers of Emanuel's hand alteration instruction found in Christian's manuscript, particularly the ones in B flat, E Major, and G Major Concertos. Today, five Berlin Concertos are available

³⁴ Roe, 124.

in manuscript and housed in the West German Marburg Library.³⁵

The element of sudden surprises found in Emanuel's music influenced Christian as well as Haydn's and Mozart's string quartets and symphonies. These sudden elements are as follows: abrupt pauses, big contrasts in the melodic passage, clear divisions between tutti and solo (showed sensitivity of the composer), unexpected change of keys, involvement of unique harmonies, the improvisatory passages marked by the unbarred melody, dramatic effect and the passionate recitative passage,³⁶ the descending scale pattern and arpeggio in the melodies, the repetition of short motives, and the sequential writing and dotted rhythm.

In the art of writing for idiomatic keyboard, the texture is mostly homophonic (melody and accompaniment), rarely in three-part, although sometimes overshadowed by Sebastian Bach, Christian's father, once a while moving in scale or arpeggio. "In general, passage-work is limited to a few bars, mostly at the end of the main solo sections, and in some movements, such as the first movement of the B flat concerto, there is very little writing of technical difficulty."³⁷

From Emanuel's *The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, Christian adopted the concept of playing in cantabile style. Moreover, the elements of *Empfindsamer Stil* are shown from the passionate melodic lines, rather melancholy creating the deep emotion. The use of chromaticism and wide leaps perhaps in some respects foreshadow the style of Berlin musical idea; one of these example is the F minor concerto, Andante (second movement) in the solo part starting at bars 27-34.³⁸

"The concertos of Christian Bach have been credited, traditionally with spearheading the transition from the Baroque to the Classical Concerto."³⁹ As quoted from Bolen, Mr. Forman, the author of Mozart's Concerto Form, discovered that mostly every concerto of Christian opened and closed with "a certain stable thematic passage". Therefore, Mr. Forman took Baroque da capo Aria form and *ritornello* form as the departure point. As he concluded, basically Christian's concertos are designed from four-tutti alternated with three-solo arch form.⁴⁰

Tutti I- Solo I- Tutti II- Solo II- Tutti III- Solo III- Tutti IV

³⁵ Jane Moore Bolen, "The Five Berlin Cembalo Concertos, P. 390, of John Christian Bach: A Critical Edition," PhD diss., (The Florida State University, 1974), 12.

³⁶ Roe, 110-11, 114, 136-7.

³⁷ Bolen, 57.

³⁸ Roe, 131.

³⁹ Girdlestone Cuthbert and Sara Davis Buechner, *Mozart and His Piano Concertos*. 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), 20.

⁴⁰ Bolen, 19-20.

Usually the theme presented in the Tutti I is in the tonic key, presented in eight to ten measures length balanced by a same length phrase followed by a new theme. Solo I was based on the theme from tutti but in the dominant key. Tutti II modulates to the dominant key or relative major, while the Solo II is more adventurous, starting in the dominant then later modulate. Tutti III remains in the same key as Solo II and Solo III mostly varied and expanded the materials from previous solo or tutti.⁴¹

In the Concerto I, III, and IV, there are two kinds of tuttis: lyrical melody and rhythmic. This latter type is found in the Concerto II and V, which is typically *galant*, and the melodies are mostly based on chord and in scale forms. Cadenza of each first movement is placed after solo III as indicated by a fermata sign over a long note on a six-four chord.⁴²

The first movements of the five Berlin Concertos follow the structure of “North German Concerto” form which preferred by Emmanuel Bach in his concerto as well.⁴³

The second movements of the five Berlin Concertos are shorter and more flexible in form, slower, more highly ornamented and use dotted rhythms. A solo cadenza is placed between solo III and the *da capo dal segno* of Tutti IV.⁴⁴

In the third movements, Christian involved new themes and existing materials taken from previous entries or sub-tuttis, especially the fifth concerto. The cadenza is after solo III except for the second concerto.⁴⁵

Christian’s concertos and keyboard sonatas are important because his keyboard sonatas no longer reflected the Baroque style and differ in some ways from Emanuel. The double exposition sonata form, singing simple melodies, homophonic texture and the essentiality of the soloist; these elements have also been a great influence in Mozart’s music.

In conclusion, the life of Christian was different in many aspects from his brothers’, Friedmann, Emanuel and Friedrich. Indeed, his life was full of ambition, with a desire of learning and crave for knowledge; there were adventurous, glorious, and challenging moments during his lifetime. One of the most accomplished sons of Sebastian Bach, an early classic international composer, his music is well-known throughout Europe, exerting influence on other composers. Christian, neither under the shadow of his father nor his brothers, is a composer in his own right. The elegant, entertaining, and light qualities of his music make him become the master of *galant* style. In addition, a great composer and keyboard performer, Christian had contributed in the development of succeeding Classical keyboard sonatas and concertos.

⁴¹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴² Ibid., 22, 40.

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23-24, 40.

⁴⁵ Bolen, 25, 40.

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