

Bach's

# MUSICAL OFFERINGS



caDefax





Handwritten musical notation on a piece of paper, including staves and notes.

Cover image: *Johann Sebastian Bach* by Elias Gottlieb Hausmann (1746)

## Bach's Musical Offerings

### Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

#### Musikalisches Opfer, BWV 1079 (arr. Raaf Hekkema)

1	Largo (Sonata sopr'il soggetto Reale)	6. 13
2	Ricercar à 3 (Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluto)	5. 31
3	Allegro (Sonata sopr'il soggetto Reale)	5. 50
4	Thematis Regii Elaborationes Canonicae I	3. 07
5	Andante (Sonata sopr'il soggetto Reale)	3. 15
6	Thematis Regii Elaborationes Canonicae II	3. 51
7	Allegro (Sonata sopr'il soggetto Reale)	2. 48
8	Thematis Regii Elaborationes Canonicae III	4. 07
9	Ricercar à 6 (Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluto)	6. 02

10	<b>14 Canons, BWV 1087 (arr. Raaf Hekkema)</b>	4. 27
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#### Canonische Veränderungen über Vom Himmel hoch, BWV 769 (arr. Raaf Hekkema)

11	I: Organ chorale without BWV number — Chorale from Christmas Oratorio BWV 248 (1st Cantata) — Chorale prelude BWV 738 — Chorale from Christmas Oratorio BWV 248 (2nd Cantata) — Variation 1: in canone all'ottava.	5. 05
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12	II: Chorale from Christmas Oratorio BWV 248 (2nd Cantata) — Variation 2: alio modo in canone alla quinta.	2. 01
13	III: Chorale from Magnificat BWV 243a — Fughetta from Kirnberger Chorales BWV 701 — Variation 3: in canone alla settima.	5. 35
14	IV: Chorale from Kirnberger Chorales BWV 700 — Variation 4: in canone all'ottava per augmentationem.	5. 47
15	V: Chorale from the Little Organ Book BWV 606 — Variation 5: l'altra sorte del canone al rovescio: alla sesta, alla terza, alla seconda, alla nona.	3. 54

Total playing time: 67. 41

#### CALEFAX

**Oliver Boekhoorn** oboe, oboe d'amore & english horn

**Ivar Berix** clarinet & e-flat clarinet

**Raaf Hekkema** soprano & alto saxophone

**Jelte Althuis** basset horn & bass clarinet

**Alban Wesly** bassoon

Tracks 1-10: **Arthur Klaassens** lupophone & english horn

## The older Bach

While disappointingly little is known of Johann Sebastian Bach's life, his visit to Prussia's Frederick the Great in Potsdam on 7 May 1747 is surprisingly well documented. Bach, already an 'elder' composer, had been invited to demonstrate the newfangled instrument of the day, the fortepiano, to a select audience. He played several fugues, including a three-voice fugue, improvised on the spot, on a theme written by the king himself. When asked to improvise a six-voice fugue on this theme, later dubbed 'the King's theme' (Thema Regis, Soggetto Reale), he demurred, but promised to complete the assignment once he had returned home.

Turning down the king's request must have raised eyebrows amongst those present. It is not unlikely that Bach felt rather pushed into a corner in the company of younger composers and music buffs. At that time, he was known mostly as an

excellent improviser, but his compositions themselves were considered quaintly old-fashioned. Bach had more than enough reason to want to impress Frederick: his position as cantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, a post Bach had fulfilled for nearly twenty years, had brought him scant recognition and little satisfaction. Leipzig's city council likewise regarded Bach more as an organist than a composer. Even so, he had completed one of his major accomplishments there: nearly five years' worth of cantatas (of which some two hundred survive). His remaining tasks consisted of running two churches and the choir and residents of the Thomasschule, a boarding school for needy boys.

In the two months following his appearance at Potsdam, Bach composed the six-part fugue (here called *ricercar*), ten 'never-ending' canons, and a lengthy four-movement trio sonata for flute (Frederick was an accomplished flautist), violin and basso continuo. These pieces,



Raaf Hekkema, with  
straight alto saxophone



together with the improvised — and subsequently notated — three-part fugue, form the '*musical offering*' that Bach, at his own expense, had printed and delivered to Frederick the Great.

Over the years, myriad questions have been raised regarding the nature of this music and Bach's reasons for dedicating such an elaborate work to the king. For starters, it was common knowledge that Frederick was not fond of fugues. There was a marked difference between Bach's 'old-hat' music, rooted in tradition and the church, and the *Empfindsamkeit* of the young talent Frederick had collected at his court (including Joachim Quantz and Bach's second son Carl Philipp Emanuel), which favoured simpler forms and extravagantly ornamented melodies. It is possible that in this new work Bach set out to poke fun at *Empfindsamkeit*, for example in the almost ludicrously frequent *Seufzers* (sighs) in the Andante of the trio sonata. Bach's erudite Latin titles and his

unmistakable reference to music from the sixteenth and seventeenth century (the title and character of both *ricercares*) must have made a fusty impression on Frederick.

The publication of the *Musical Offering* contained the following dedication to the king: 'To Your Majesty is hereby consecrated in deepest deference a Musical Offering, the opening part of which derives from Your Majesty's own august hand. With reverent pleasure I still recall the very gracious royal favour when, some time ago, during my visit in Potsdam, Your Majesty deigned to play to me a theme for a fugue upon the clavier, and at the same time charged me most graciously to carry it out in Your Majesty's presence . . .' Not only does Bach's tone come across as an exceptionally subservient, it should be noted that Bach addresses the king in German, while the language of the court was French.

### **Performing The Musical Offering**

For years I have wrestled with the question of how to convincingly forge the *Musikalisches Opfer* into a Calefax concert vehicle. And the questions still abound. Following *Die Kunst der Fuge*, the *Goldberg Variations* and the *Vom Himmel hoch* variations, this was the only large-scale late Bach work I had not yet arranged for reed quintet. I was faced with the following issues:

- the largest fugue (the second *Ricercare*) is for six voices — one more than we normally have at our disposal;
- the imposing trio sonata is, strictly speaking, intended for just three players. The bass line (*basso continuo*) is traditionally embellished with *ad libitum* middle voices, not a technique in which I was experienced;



-the work was never intended to be performed as a whole or in public, thus presenting the challenge of how to arrange the parts in a satisfactory order;

-the work includes a collection of canons called the *Thematis Regii Elaborationes Canonicae*. These canons were not meant to be performed, but more to demonstrate the composer's ingenuity in treating a theme canonically. Some were notated as a 'riddle canon', which the player was meant to solve himself. How should these be played (and ended) in a concert?

A few years ago, I tackled that last matter and set the canons as a successful three-part concert grouping. In doing so my attention was drawn to a certain characteristic of the work, namely, the prevalence of the numbers 3 and 6, that put me on the track to solving the remaining problems. I started thinking in terms of a reed sextet. We needed another double-reed instrument, preferably one

in a lower register. My choice fell upon an uncommon but extraordinary instrument: the bass oboe. For this recording, its part is played on a relatively modern instrument called the lupophone, which has a fuller sound and a larger range than the early bass oboe.

Using this six-voice ensemble as my starting point, I let my imagination loose on the trio sonata, and decided to take up the challenge of composing the (normally improvised) extra voices myself. I went to pick harpsichordist Tineke Steenbrink's brains. She gave me useful tips and boosted my confidence to attempt a convincing six-part version of all four movements of the trio sonata.

So now the entire work (except for the three-part Ricercare) was for six voices and I could turn to the order, which now no longer would need to be dictated by the original instrumentation. Since fugal music can prove to be fatiguing when heard in

succession (Frederick had a point there), I decided to alternate them with the more 'human' (let's say more 'modern') movements of the trio sonata. The last and weirdest set of canons, which modulates continually upward and ends on the dominant, forms the ideal bridge to the six-part Ricercare as a majestic conclusion.

### **Vom Himmel Hoch**

In that same year, 1747, a month after his visit to Potsdam, Bach joined the 'Korrespondierenden Sozietät der musicalischen Wissenschaften', an exclusive correspondence club for composers. Finally, Bach achieved the kind of recognition he had been missing. His far better-known countryman Telemann was already a member; Georg Friedrich Händel, a celebrity in England, had even been made an honorary member. Bach became, at his own request, the society's fourteenth member.

For Bach the number fourteen had always been an important one, because his surname, rendered in numbers, comes out to: B=2, A=1, C=3, H=8, thus:  $2+1+3+8=14$ . As a gift to the society, in 1746 he had a portrait of himself made by the renowned Leipzig painter Elias Gottlob Hausmann. Alongside this gift, his inauguration into the society was celebrated with a work composed especially for this purpose: the *Canonische Veränderungen über Vom Himmel hoch*: five canonic variations on Martin Luther's Christmas hymn 'Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her'.

This compositional tour-de-force was likewise presented to the honourable members of the society in the form of riddle canons: the melodies and their entrances were given, but the rest had to be guessed, based on the current harmonic guidelines and practices. This was a common form of highbrow entertainment.

Bach had already used this melody many times prior in the course of his career — as an organ chorale, in the *Magnificat* and in the *Weihnachtsoratorium*. All nine known versions have found a place in my arrangement, resulting in a many-coloured Christmas collage. Each of the five Vom Himmel hoch variations is preceded by one or more older chorales. The total number comes out to . . . fourteen.

### **14 riddle canons**

In the Hausmann portrait mentioned earlier, Bach is portrayed holding a small musical score: The Canon triplex à 6 (BWV 1076), a composition of just nine measures, arranged over three staves. The fact that Bach chose this as the theme for his portrait betrays the significance such a mathematical composition had for him.

Lack of recognition and the absence of a better job offer at this point in his life appear to have spurred Bach to turn his

gaze inward and give his imagination free rein with large-scale contrapuntal compositions mainly intended only for study or to be shared with insiders: the *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988), the *Canonische Veränderungen über Vom Himmel hoch* (BWV 769), the *Musikalisches Opfer* (BWV 1079), and *Die Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080).

It is tempting to see the canon in the Hausmann portrait as a sort of profession of faith, as if Bach is saying: this is who I really am. The three staves on that single sheet are intended to be read not only from the perspective of the observer but also from that of the composer himself, making it a six-part composition. It is a riddle canon based on the first eight bass notes of the theme of the Goldberg variations (which, incidentally, shows a striking similarity to the Von Himmel hoch theme), to be heard on track no. 10, from 3.08 - 3.40. It is part of a larger composition, the 14 Canons, which were

discovered only in 1974 on the back of Bach's own copy of the Goldberg Variations. The nature of this work — again, riddle canons — allows it to be written on a single sheet of staff paper. Here we see Bach's ingenuity in its most condensed form. It seemed to us a natural choice to include it on this album, our first with six reed instruments.

### **Raaf Hekkema**

(translation: Jonathan Reeder)

**Arthur Klaassens** is a multi-faceted and broadly interested oboist based in The Netherlands. He graduated at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague with distinction. He is an active chamber musician, and co-founded Trio Cortado, a unique woodwind ensemble for which he is the main arranger.

Arthur has played with almost all the major orchestras and ensembles of the Netherlands and appears regularly as a soloist. New developments include the addition of the Lupophone to his instrumentarium, and the commissioning of several new pieces to include this exciting instrument.



Arthur Klaassens



**Calefax** is a close-knit ensemble of five reed players united by a shared passion. For thirty-five years they have been acclaimed in the Netherlands and abroad for their virtuosic playing, brilliant arrangements and innovative stage presentation. They are the inventors of a completely new genre: the reed quintet. They provide inspiration to young wind players from all over the world who follow in their footsteps. Calefax can be defined as a classical ensemble with a pop mentality.

*From left to right:*

bass clarinet, english horn, oboe, lupophone,  
english horn, oboe d'amore, bassoon, soprano  
saxophone, (straight) alto saxophone, b-flat  
clarinet, basset horn, e-flat clarinet, clarinet.



## Acknowledgments

### PRODUCTION TEAM

Balance engineer & producer **Nicolas Bartholomé (Little Tribeca)**

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English translation **Jonathan Reeder**

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*This album was recorded at Doopsgezinde Kerk, Haarlem, the Netherlands, in June 2020.*

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Nicolas Bartholomé

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