Bach and his Rhythm Stick

Some thoughts on rhythmic performance in Bach's organ music.

Nobody knows exactly how Bach performed his music. However treatises from around his time contain instructions and suggestions for the interpretation of different types of rhythms, particularly dotted rhythms and triplets. Although there are many conflicting opinions on the performance of Bach's compositions there are enough clues for the committed performer to arrive at an informed playing style.

Notation is an imperfect medium at the best of times and in the 17th and 18th centuries was only the starting point for performances that were enlivened by performers' own contributions. There is much evidence that the performance of some rhythms differed from their notation. From Gregorian chant onwards, much music has come down to us in written form having existed first in the oral tradition, usually with different embellishments for each performance.

Bach, like his forbears and contemporaries, was a great improviser. He was also a committed teacher and composer and there are many instances of revisions to scores that were made by himself, or his pupils. He was also renowned as an organ expert and a formidable performer.

Many of his organ works only exist in copies by pupils or associates and were originally mostly on two staves.

In the absence of a time machine to take us back to Bach we have to find our own solutions so that we can play this music in a meaningful way for ourselves and our listeners.

This illustrated recital will contain my personal solutions to some of the rhythmic anomalies that have interested me since I began playing. They have been arrived at by a process of constant reading, listening and discussion. They are not intended as a set of rules – in Bach's time every performance was undoubtedly different as it is today – but to demonstrate some precepts that may be useful.

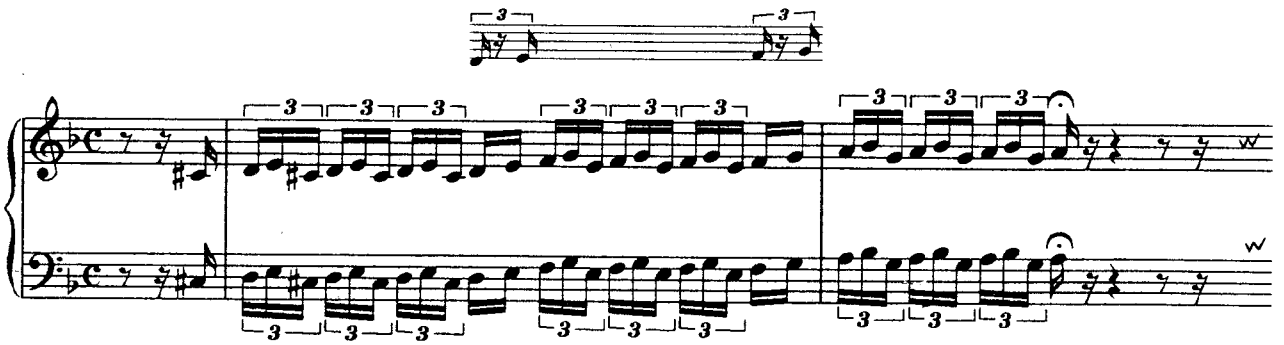
The extracts that follow are intended to illustrate these.

BWV 565 is notorious in Bach's output: is it by Bach, was it originally written for organ? A full discussion of these questions can be found in *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* (second edition) by my namesake Peter F. Williams.

For example look at the passage below which also has my suggested solutions.

Toccata con Fuga in d

BWV 565



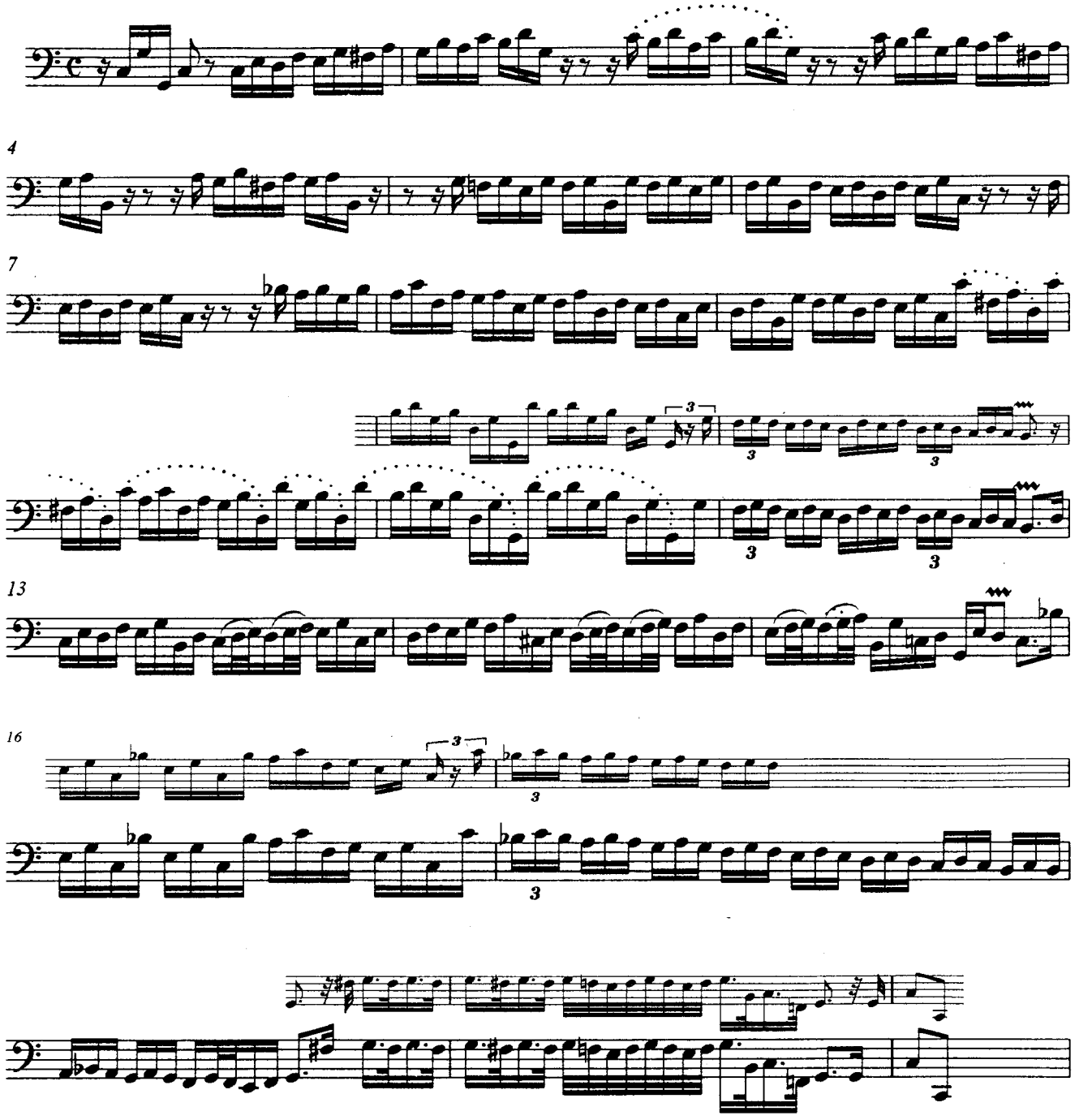
For me the sudden *duplet* in the middle of the *triplet* passage sounds 'out of kilter' and does not fit at all with that I have learnt over the last fifty years!

This leads me to the first piece in the programme. The **Toccata in C**, BWV 564, appears around 1719 - two years after Bach was appointed to Cöthen. In its structure it brings together the old multi-sectional *toccata* with the three movement *concerto grosso* of Vivaldi and his ilk.

The first section begins with rhetorical flourishes, first for manuals and then for pedals. The pedal solo follows fine examples by Georg Böhm and Dietrich Buxtehude but goes much further in its variety of notation and phrasing. I have heard performances of this played through in machine-like strict tempo, thus missing the opportunity for rhetorical phrasing. The incorporation of triplet semiquavers into the line provides opportunities for interpretation similar to the earlier excerpt from BWV 565. Notice the *over dotting* at the final cadence - more on this later. Much of the material is derived from an anacrusic cell, shown by the dotted phrase marks, which is expanded into longer phrases leading to the sextuplet passages also beginning with an up-beat semiquaver. I prefer to play this in the rhythm of the triplet semiquavers. I have included the whole of this passage because it is so remarkable.

Toccata in C

BWV 564

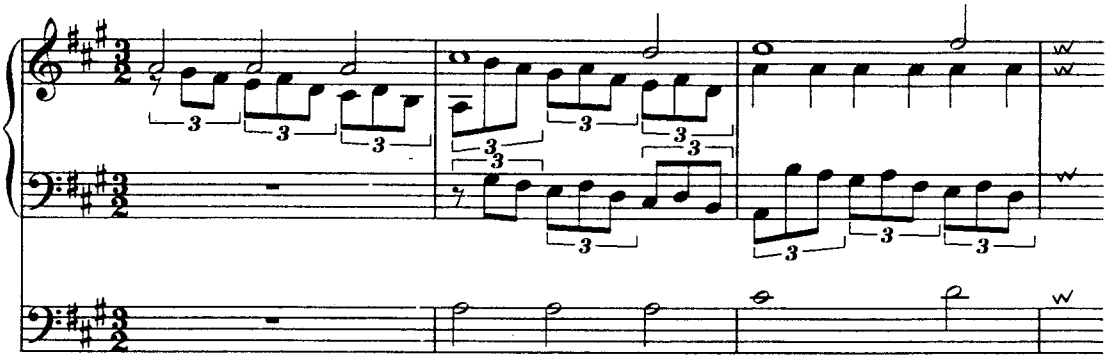


You will notice similar alterations to the printed text in the *Adagio* section of the Toccata in C.

As with the up-beat semiquavers in the pedal solo, the same principle is applied in bar 3 etc. There are also some judicious stretching of rhythms elsewhere.

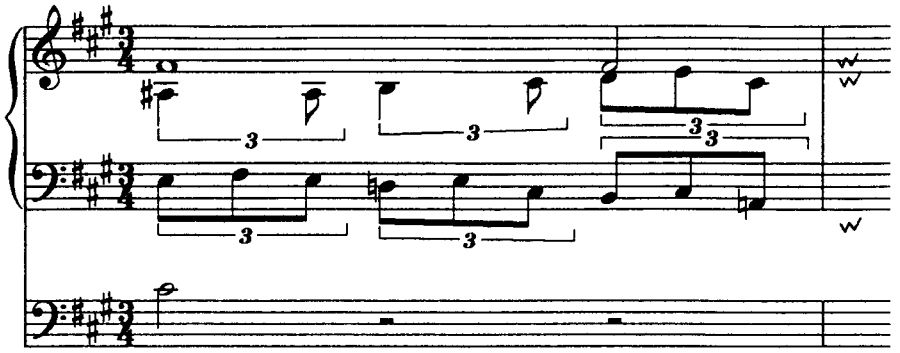
One of the decisions any performer of music from the *baroque* period has to take is how to play *duplets* and *triplets* when they occur together. Very often the *duplets* can be reconciled to the *triplets* and played unequally as a number of contemporary sources indicate. However there are instances when matters are not so clear-cut.

BWV 608 **In dulci jubilo** from the *Orgelbüchlein* is one of those. From the opening the hymn-tune is in *canon* between the *soprano* and the *tenor* (played an octave lower on a 4ft. stop so that it fits on the pedal-board) accompanied by triplet quavers.

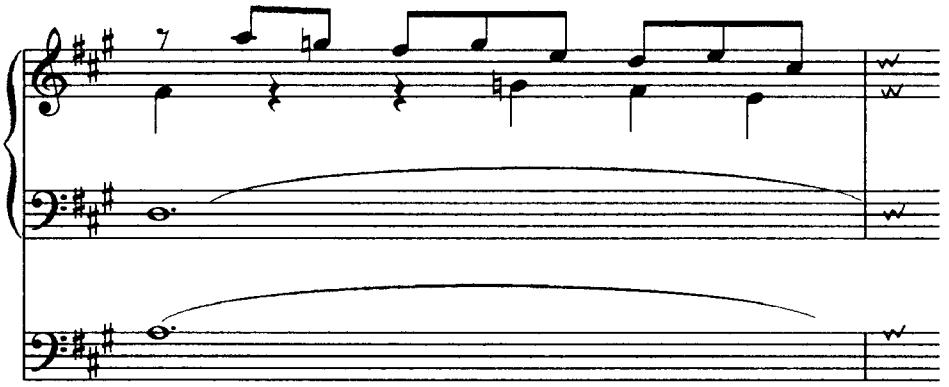


These should really be tripiet crotchets but Bach notated them as triplet quavers to make them more distinctive. When I was a student I always played the *duplet* crotchets unequally to fit with the triplets; however some performers prefer to play them as written.

But bars 25 *et al* have this:

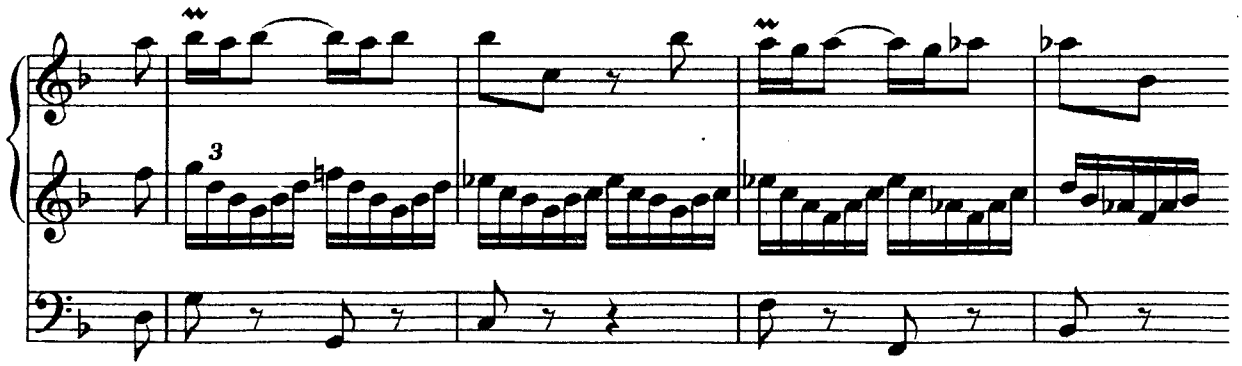


Again, although it is possible to play all the rhythms as written, the final few bars do not lie comfortably at the best of times and sound a scramble unless assimilated.



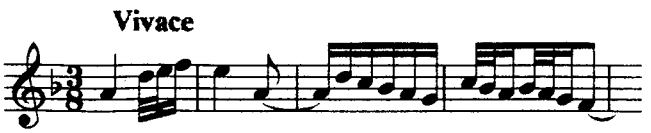
Let us see how it comes out this evening!

The **Trio Sonata No. III in d**, BWV 527, is a rich source of rhythmic variety. The first movement contains figures using demisemiquavers, semiquavers and sextuplets - mostly juxtaposed but occasionally together.

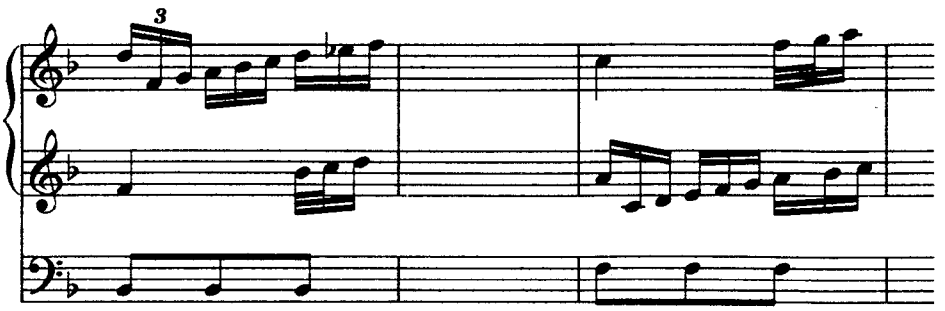


Here the ornament encourages one to play the right hand duplets unequally.

After the *Adagio e dolce* - surely one of the most beautiful of middle movements - the last movement makes much use of a written out slide motif.

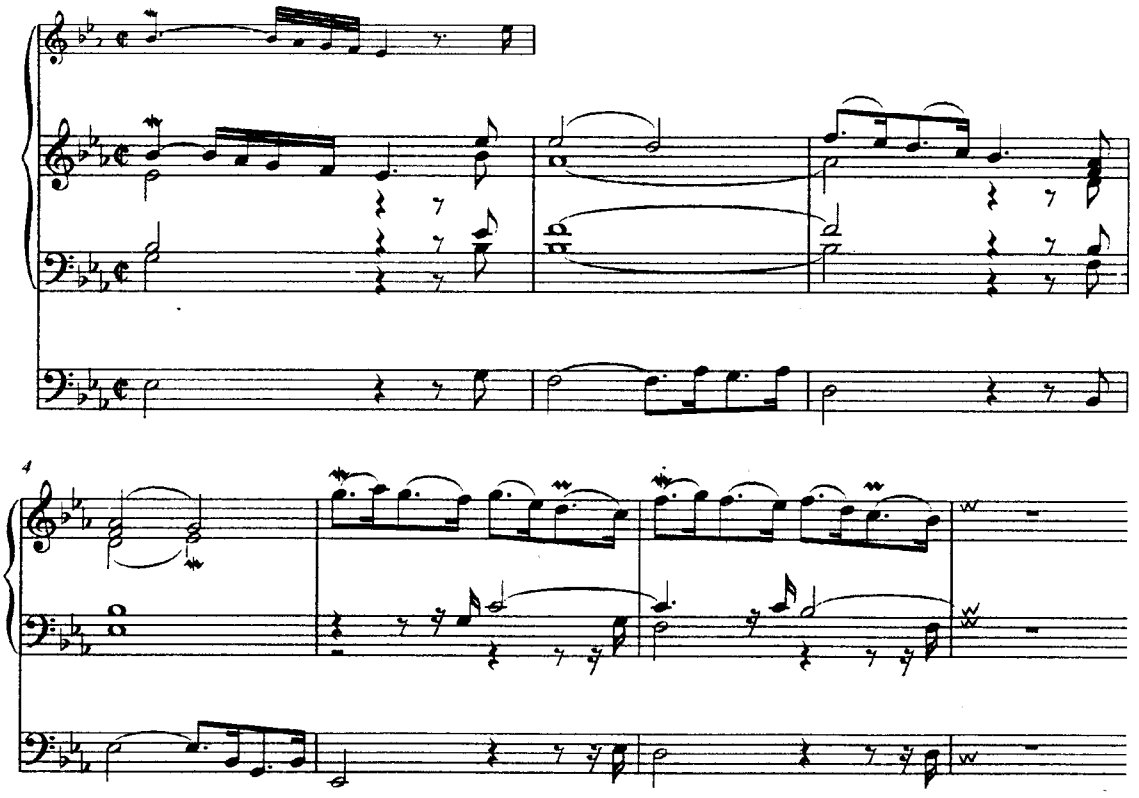


There are also many sextuplets and at times the two figures are combined.



Some performers do assimilate the slide into the triplet semiquaver scale but I usually continue to play the slide rather faster than written.

The final selection is taken from the third part of the *Clavier-Übung* - keyboard practice - and is headed by the **Praeludium pro Organo pleno**, 552 [1], in E^b. One could spend weeks discussing the symbolism contained in this piece: its key would not have suited the tuning of most organs in Bach's time, its structure and content is both unique and yet at times looks back to much earlier writing etc. In the four books of the *Clavier-Übung* Bach was concerned with demonstrating transferring differing national styles and media to the keyboard and these themes are very present in book III. Hence the Prelude in E^b begins with five voiced writing reminiscent of a French *ouverture* and continues with three voiced *style galant* chordal passages with echoes. Later there are double fugues where the pedals have the old alternate toe version of the running semiquavers.



One of the other threads running through this discussion of Bach's rhythms concerns the performance of dotted rhythms. It was often the practice to lengthen the dotted note and thus shorten the following upbeat. Whether this was done and by how much depended, as always, on the context of the passage. A characteristic of French *ouverture* performance was this stretching of dotted notes and shortening of upbeat notes or figures.

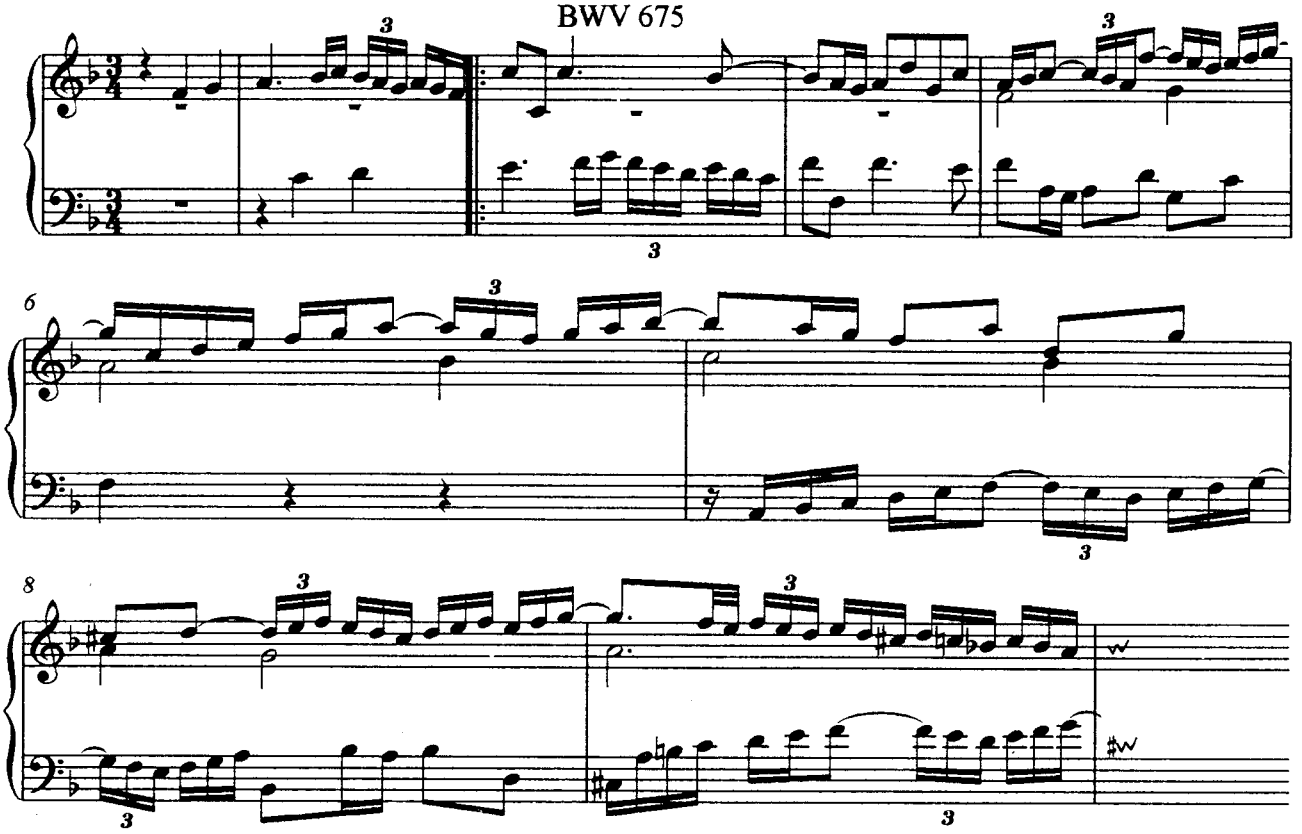
There is a massive divide between those who play an approximation of the *ossia* bar and those who play the notes exactly as they appear, even, at times, expanding the value of the upbeat quaver. Arguments rage for and against: for me it is quite simple. This section of the prelude has the characteristics of an *ouverture* and is performed accordingly.

The *manualiter* prelude BWV 675 contains many opportunities for rhythmic reconciliation between triplets and duplets. However I try not to play with rhythmic rigidity so that this 'angels' song' does not remain earthbound.

Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr

a 3 Canto in fermo in Alto

BWV 675



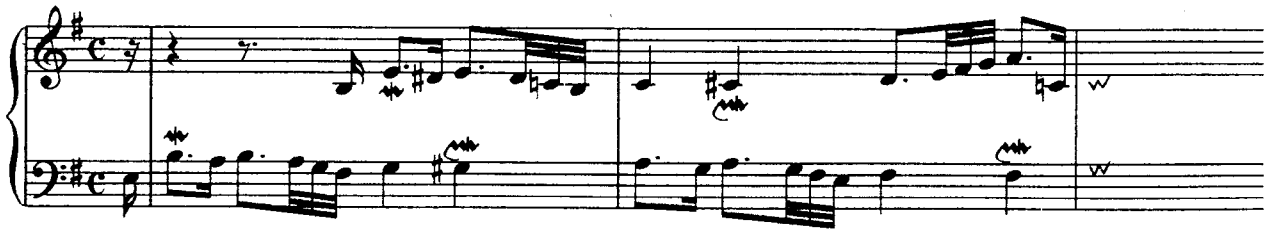
By contrast BWV 681 is firmly in the French *ouverture* style and receives appropriate over dotting.

Fughetta super

Wir glauben all an einen Gott

manualliter

BWV 681



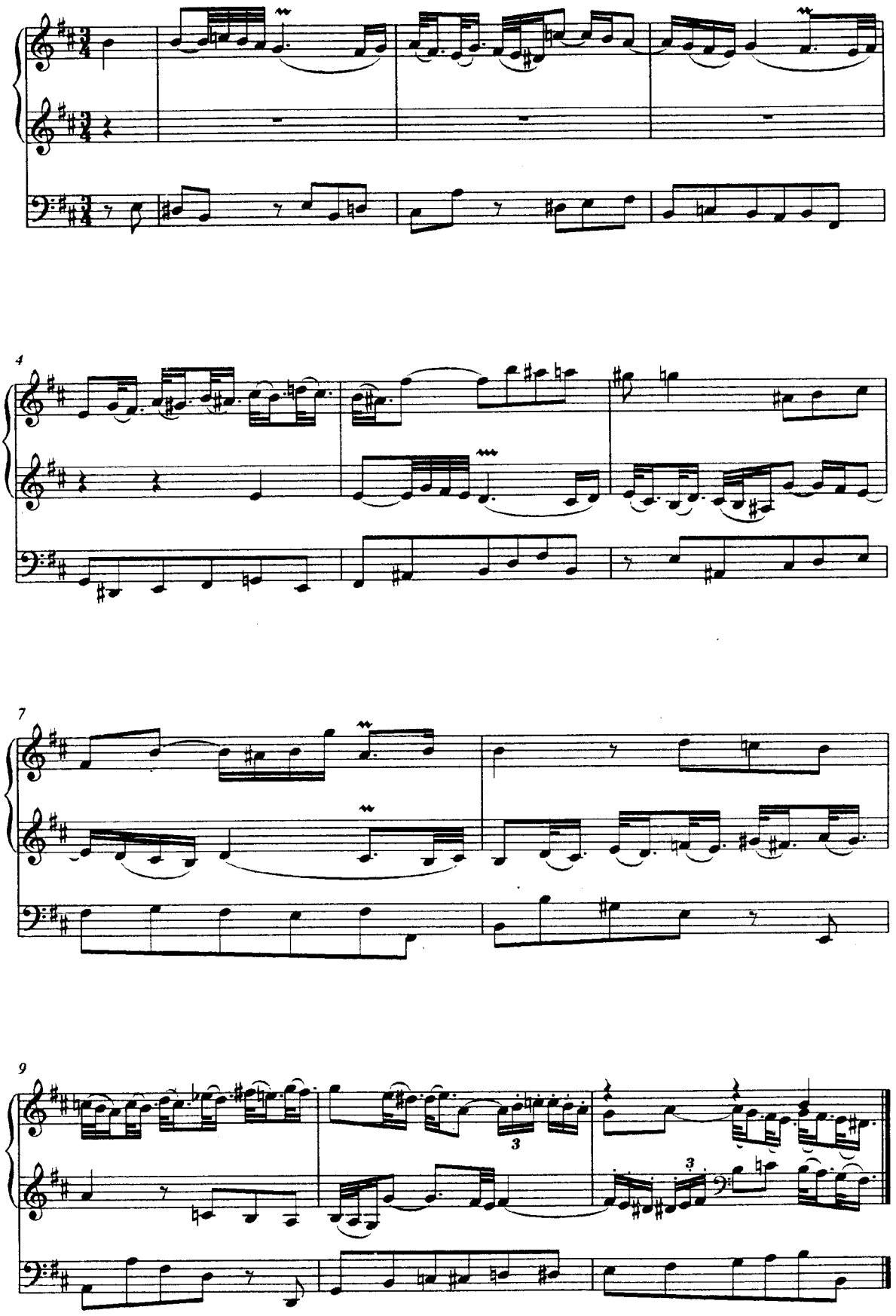
Notice Bach's notation of the second and fourth beats of each bar and compare it with a similar figure in the next prelude BWV 682.

This five-voiced prelude on **Vater unser im Himmelreich**, BWV 682, is one of Bach's most complex rhythmic constructions. Note, in particular, the *lombard* rhythms in b. 4, the slide in b. 2^3, and the triplets at the end of the extract.

Vater unser im Himmelreich

à 2 Clav. e Pedal e Canto fermo in Canone

BWV 682



To be effective the *galanteries*, the *lombard* rhythms and slides, need to be 'over done' whilst the dots above the triplet semiquavers indicate a straight rhythmic performance as well as *staccato*. The duplet semiquavers can be assimilated where there are triplets against them.

I have included the final **Fuga a 5 con pedale pro Organo pleno**, BWV 552 [2], partly to round off this evening's selection and also to demonstrate the speed relationship between the three sections.

For me the beat of the first section corresponds to the beat of the middle section, then becoming a final .

So to sum up my personal rhythmic habits!

Dotted rhythms, slides, *lombard* rhythms, tend to be 'over done' **depending on their context.**

Triplets and duplets are usually reconciled by adjusting the duplets, however, occasionally, the reverse can happen. There are occasional instances where 'twos against threes' can be played as written - where there are octave leaps or other disjunct movement. However this depends on the context within the phrase and also on personal taste.

No doubt the perceptive listener this evening will have noticed one or two other matters such as *trills* usually starting on the beat, on the upper auxiliary and beginning slowly but with acceleration.

The embellishment of repeats.

My use of certain 'middle finger' fingerings.

You might also notice that I am not particularly worried about achieving machine-like consistency.

The bibliography below is not exhaustive but can be supplemented by much listening and research via the 'web'. *They will not necessarily agree on all matters!*

Peter Hurford	*Making Music on the Organ*	OUP
Howard Ferguson	*Keyboard Interpretation*	OUP
Paul Hale (editor)	*The IAO Millennium Book*	IAO
Thistlethwaite & Webber (editors)	*The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*	Cambridge
Robert Donington	*The Interpretation of Early Music*	Faber
Robert Donington	*Baroque Music Style and Performance*	Faber
Frederick Neumann	*Performance Practices of the 17th & 18th Centuries*	Schirmer
Peter F. Williams	*The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*	Cambridge

PJW

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