

## Sinfonia 9 (Three-Part Invention) in F minor BWV 795

### ANALYSIS

**Broad Description/Type** Baroque keyboard piece (to be transcribed for orchestra)

#### Background Information

When he wrote these pieces, Bach had two purposes:

- 1) teach keyboard students how to play in two and three parts with dexterity, a singing, fluid style, and articulation which highlights their construction.
- 2) stimulate their musical imagination and get them to think like inventive composers

In other words, to focus not just on performance skills, but also on creative thinking, imagination, and discovering possibilities in the notes.



Bach originally wrote these inventions in his *Little Keyboard Book for Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, his eldest son, who took lessons, of course, from his father. The book was begun on 22 January 1720 and the Inventions were added between autumn 1722 and spring 1723, when little Wilhelm was twelve. The 15 Two-Part Inventions span every major and minor key from C up to B, as do the 15 Three-Part Inventions, which Bach sometimes titled "Sinfonias."

Bach's intent is made clear from the preface he wrote for the collection: that the student "would acquire good *inventiones*" (meaning having a sense of what makes a good musical "idea" or invention), "the ability to develop them well" (meaning the ability to see all the possibilities inherent in a little musical idea), and "to gain from the beginning a strong foretaste of composition."

In Bach's day, it was assumed that someone who played an instrument was also a composer, a musical thinker, someone who would not just reproduce another's compositions, but actually invent their own. (Nowadays it is not uncommon for young people to study their instrument for many years and never be called upon to think this way, let alone compose even a short melody.)

In the Inventions, Bach is determined to demonstrate how the smallest musical idea—even 4-5 notes—can be used to create a complete, tightly-knit, two-minute piece, by developing it in a dizzying variety of ways: imitation, lengthening or prolonging, inverting, fragmenting and, well, *inventing*.

Bach expected another kind of creativity from his students, too; the Inventions have no expression marks—no tempo or dynamic markings, no articulations, no ornaments. Later generations of Bach's students penciled them in, but every modern piano student still must accept the challenge of applying their own ideas to make these pieces coherent and expressive.

In a way, we are all Bach's students—players and listeners alike. To paraphrase Bach's preface, the pieces should "demonstrate to lovers of music, and especially to those desirous of learning, a particular way to *listen to music*." In other words, to give us practice retracing, with our ears, what the composer has invented, worked out, and committed to paper—first hearing one voice, then another, then a third, and then their interweaving and dialogue.

Pianist Helmut Lachenmann said, "In practice, this manner of listening involves focusing the mind, and thus exertion. But to exert oneself as a means of penetrating reality, as progressive self-discovery, is to experience a moment of happiness."

Among Bach's 15 Three Part Inventions (he actually called them "Sinfonias"), which show an astonishing variety of moods, stylistic character, and compositional strategies, there is none quite like Number 9, the Sinfonia in F minor. It is not only the longest of the Inventions, but also traverses some of the most profound melancholy, soulful yearning, and thorny dissonance that was conceivable in 1723, all in the space of thirty-five measures and using just two tiny musical ideas:

- A slowly descending chromatic line, all half-steps. In Baroque musical rhetoric this was known as the "lament bass" and was a musical symbol of mourning and grief. Bach used a similar bass line in his B Minor Mass for the *Crucifixus* ("He was crucified") movement.
- a "sigh figure" of three notes, repeated twice and then expanded a third time

The way Bach combines these two ideas is both masterful from a compositional standpoint and heartbreakingly beautiful. But what is even more astounding is the subtle way the one becomes the other; in other words, the slow chromatic figure *becomes* the sigh figure as the piece moves toward its intense climax.

## Elements of Music

### Melody



Motivic, based on two tiny motifs:

1. The "lament bass," a descending chromatic figure, familiar from Baroque opera and cantata and associated with grieving. Bach uses this motif in his cantata, "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Sagen" (Crying, Lamenting, Worrying, Talking) and the "Crucifixus" of his Mass in B minor.
2. The "sigh" motif: ascending third and descending step.
3. A third, energetic motif, which is Motif 2 which intermediary tones filled in.



These motifs undergo radical transformation, including:

- a) inversion
- b) expansion
- c) imitation
- d) combination

The development of the two motifs are excessively chromatic, in keeping with the angst and nearly completely unrelenting tension of the piece's affect. The tritone features prominently, adding extra anxiety, unease, and disorientation to the melody.

### Rhythm

Although the piece is slow and melancholy, it bears the signs of Bach's rhythmic invention. The sigh motif (3 eighth notes) begins with a rest, which gives it a breathless urgency. The momentum of this motif stands against the steady plodding of the lament motif, which is consistently presented in plodding, carefully quarter notes. The motifs remain remarkably consistent in their rhythmic profile, which makes them recognizable even when their pitches are radically altered.

### Harmony

One of the most revolutionary features of this piece, and something which has prompted commentators to call Bach the "first twelve-tone composer." Through chromatic movement, phrases cadence in F minor, C minor (5, 21), Ab major (13, 28), Eb major (15), Db (24, 26). The fast harmonic changes, in spite of the slow tempo, are possible because of diminished intervals and especially diminished 7ths and 7<sup>th</sup> chords which made slippery modulations possible, and create a feeling of unease and harmonic unsettledness.

<b>Texture</b>	Strict 3-part contrapuntal, with a few exceptions where the texture is thinned to two voices for contrast, e.g. 5-6.
<b>Timbre</b>	Although the piece was written for Klavier, implying a single timbre throughout, Bach creates an astonishing variety of tonal colors, primarily through register changes and the illusion of changing instrumental colors, mostly in the way the three voices of the counterpoint interact—almost like individual symphonic instruments.
<b>Form</b>	What seems to be a through-composed stream turns out to be—on close examination—a tightly-knit, very efficient argument, built from 2 tiny motifs that work in two-measure phrases. Bach typically constructs larger structures with 2 phrases of 2 bars followed by a longer, developed section. When he breaks out of the 2+2 measure phrase pairs, which happens 3 times, it is always to generate an extended, less predictable, and more volatile, emotional section. It is these longer phrase units that create a sense of heightened tension.

## HEART STATEMENT

The heart of the piece is a relentless, weary melancholy created by a descending chromatic bass line in counterpoint with a sigh motif.

## MUSIC SELECTION

For many people, Bach is the undisputed master of compositional genius, balancing form, compositional ingenuity, and emotional depth. For me, this was not a given—certainly not as a kid. I don't need to defend Bach's genius to Bach lovers, but I want to help students develop their own love for, and appreciation for Bach's special gift. A keyboard invention, transcribed for orchestra, will give us a chance to taste the inventive process ourselves.

### Introducing the Piece

Using a light bulb as an example, invite students to reflect on inventions they consider amazing, especially ones that may have been dismissed or scoffed at when first envisioned (telephone, television, personal computer). Use the Schopenhauer quote: The creative mind is able to think of something that nobody has thought yet, while looking at something that everybody sees.

### Skill Outcome

- a. Students will become more skilled independent interpreters, especially regarding decisions about phrase shaping, dynamics, use of rubato, and bowing.
- b. Students will make instrumentation choices for an orchestral transcription.

### Strategies

1. Discuss aspects of the score (any score) which are left to the performer to decide (phrasing, dynamic shape, articulating form through rubato and phrase shape, and bowing)
2. Remind students of the difference between *replicating* and *interpreting*.
3. Guide students to decode phrase structure and then find ways to make the phrase structure audible. *What note is most important in the phrase? What shape is suggested? Where are sentences and paragraphs? Where are cadences? Where are changes in color suggested?*
4. Have students experiment with bowings and their effects on the motifs.
5. Have students perform sections of the piece in trios and compare each other's interpretations.

### Assessment

1. Have students develop a simple rubric to critique the effectiveness of an interpretation.
2. Have students rehearse and perform the piece in a trio, with another paired trio using the above rubric to critique their peers.

3. Long term project: let students choose another Invention to transcribe for their own combination of instruments.

### Knowledge Outcome

**Students will analyze development and *invention* (the use of very small motifs in generating large-scale forms) and ways meaning is created in textless, non-programmatic music.**

#### Strategies

1. Introduce idea of *motif* and the challenge of creating large structures with small amount of material. Use Legos as example. Invite students to speculate on the smallest motif possible.
2. Use "Ah, Poor Bird" as an example of a development in miniature and how the entire melody is generated from the first 3 notes. Discuss how its notes have meaning apart from its text.
3. Listen to Bach 3-Part Invention in D to uncover its "little idea."
4. Read Bach's own Preface to the Inventions and Sinfonias. Discuss his intention in creating these pieces in the first place.
5. Listen to Sinfonia 9 (with student playing or recording) and analyze the two motifs. Compare to ways they are later developed. Have students uncover motif in every measure. Discuss what is the "story" and how in many instrumental pieces the "story" is in the notes.
6. Listen to use of the lament bass in other pieces, which give clues about meaning/interpretation:
  - a. Bach Cantata: "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Sagen"
  - b. Bach: "Crucifixus" from Mass in B Minor

#### Assessment

1. Have students analyze another Invention of their own choosing, tracing the motif(s) and how it is developed. They can choose the format their presentation will take.
2. Invite students to uncover motifs and their development in other pieces being rehearsed, both in orchestra and in their private lesson repertoire.

### Affective Outcome

**Students will reflect on their own potential as visionaries/inventors and the importance of supporting and encouraging others in their visions.**

#### Strategies

1. Compare famous inventions and innovations of history and especially those dismissed by critics. *What is required to "stick with" an idea or vision?*
2. *I am amazed by...*  
Students will pick some visionary idea--from the ancient Greeks through modern times--and explain to the class what they find especially amazing about the imagination of possibility involved in the particular invention or idea.
3. *Strong Choices*  
*Students will find examples of music where an arranger made a particularly bold decision. They can share their finds and discuss whether the choices made worked or not, and why.*
4. *Discuss with students their own sense of personal vision and ingenuity. Do they consider themselves visionary? Are they supportive or encouraging of any friends or family members with this gift? What is the role of encouragers and doubters and in the processes of realizing new possibilities in the world? Did Bach have an encourager? Learn the song "One Man's Hands."*

#### Assessment

Let students choose one of the "big questions" above to develop further in an essay.