

“ADIEUX À BACH”

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SUMMARY. The *Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletissimo*, BWV 992 was written not only in youth and in search of compositional identity, but also in a period when several meanings and musical genres overlapped under the term of capriccio. Moreover, among specialists, there is still no full agreement on the date and dedicatee of Bach’s work. Who departures and from whom? Is he a family member or a friend? Due to the extra-musical program of the movements’ subtitles, besides the formal and rhetorical analysis psychology-related concepts might help to highlight these questions. However, by farewell sometimes new perspectives open, and other possible influences and models become clear either, within family for a father’s son (Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach) or outside of it, in a composer generation distance (Ludwig van Beethoven).

Keywords: J. S. Bach, capriccio, programmatic keyboard music

Towards the Baroque Capriccio: Origins and Overlaps of Genres

Etymologically, the noun *capriccio* derives from the Italian *capra* and suggests the uncontrolled jumps of the goat. In *Examen de Ingenis para las Ciencias* (1575) by J. Huarte de San Juan, the adjective *capriccioso* appears in relation to behavior and personality: ingenious and stubborn people who prefer to follow their own way.² Also in Renaissance but in fine arts, the term gains aesthetic hints. Capriccio or *grotesche* are called the decorations of

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² Stembridge, Christopher. “Most Capricious Ovid, Giotto and other creative wits. In *Organists’ Review*, 2015 September, p. 17.



the framework of a larger composition, or the surrounding frame of the title page to Frescobaldi's *Secondo Libro di Toccate* (1628). *Capricciose inventione* are ornamental figurations as well, but often made improvisatory and at high speed. Thus, as *grotto*, capriccio relates to Dionysian cult. Giorgio Vasari in his *Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani* (1568) labels with the *capriccioso* term Giotto, Mantegna and Alberti. In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1618) *capriccio* is represented by a youth, while *capricci* are extravagant forms characterized by instability and variety, present in both fine arts and music.³

In music, the term appears for the first time in the title of *Primo, secondo e terzo libro del capriccio* (1561) by Jachet de Berchem – settings of 93 stanzas from *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto.⁴ Other composers equalized this term with *canzona*, for instance Ottavio Bariolla in *Capricci, overo Canzoni* (1594) or Banchieri in *Fantasie, overo Canzoni alla francese* (1603).⁵ Praetorius in his *Syntagma musicum* (1614) related the capriccio or spontaneous fantasy to the free fugue, determined only by the mastery and personality of the composer.⁶

In the Baroque, the capriccio term was also associated with melancholy, a fluctuant mental state between ups-downs symbolized by the leaps of the goat. To this tradition belongs *Capriccio del primo tono* (with *Malinconico e largo* indication) by Giovanni Salvatore, or *Capriccio di durezze* and *Capriccio cromatico* (monopartite, dissonant, slow) from *Il Primo Libro di Capricci* (1624) by Frescobaldi. The latter collection of 12 harpsichord pieces also includes *Capriccio Terza sopra il Cucu* – regarded as the earliest instrumental piece based on the imitation of the cuckoo.⁷ The onomatopoeic capriccio belongs to 17th-century's Italian and South-German fashion.⁸ The last movement of Bach's *Capriccio BWV 992* imitates the post horn, while the finale of the D major *Sonata BWV 963* bears the *Thema all'imitatio Gallina Cucu* subtitle. In the French harpsichord school, one can find several other examples, as the famous *La Poule* from the G major Suite of *Troisième Livre de pièces de clavecin* (1727) by Jean-Philippe Rameau or *Le Coucou* from Suite no. 3 of *Pièces de Clavecin* (1735) by Claude Daquin.

In his *L'Arte del violino* (1720) Locatelli denominates *capriccio* the extended virtuoso passages of the solo violin. Vivaldi likewise includes unaccompanied virtuoso episodes in his violin concerts, but instead of capriccios,

³ Op. cit. pp. 17-18.

⁴ Op. cit.

⁵ Schwandt, Eric. "Capriccio." In *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.04867> (accessed on 12 January 2021)

⁶ Stembridge, Christopher. Op. cit. p. 19.

⁷ Op. cit. pp. 20-21.

⁸ Jones, Richard D. *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach*. vol. I, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, p. 27.

he calls them cadenzas.⁹ Other composers designate with the term of capriccio chamber works – *Capriccio stravagante* (1627) by Carlo Farina – , or instrumental suites, where it even appears among dances as in the case of *Varij e diversi capricci per camera e per chiesa* (1669) by Cazzati or *Bizzarie armoniche overo Sonate da camera* (1693) by G. B. Brevi.¹⁰

According to Antoine Furetière’s definition from his *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), capriccios are musical, poetical, or pictorial works based rather on imagination than on strict rules.¹¹ Imagination and fantasy do not limit only to dreams, but also to nightmares, such in the case of Francisco Goya’s set of 80 prints, *Los Caprichos* (1797-1798), thus opening at the same time the way to Romanticism.

The capriccio as a musical genre and capricious, in its literary sense and in the sense of extravagant, can capture the essence of Romanticism and Baroque as well, hence etymologically the Iberian *barocco* signifies an irregular, bizarre pearl.

The Capriccios of Johann Sebastian Bach

This genre occupies little space in the oeuvre of the composer, including only the *Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletteissimo* BWV 992, *Capriccio in honorem Johann Christoph Bachii Ohrdruf [iensis]* BWV 993 and the last movement (*Capriccio*) of the second Partita in C minor BWV 826. Even if not entitled as such, one can find capriccios in concerts as well. The long intervention of the harpsichord in the first movement of the 5th Brandenburg Concerto BWV 1050, though marked solo, is in fact a capriccio made up of thematic fragments.¹² A similar function might have the two chords (E minor $IV_5^6V^7$) in the second movement of the 3rd Brandenburg Concerto BWV 1048, giving place to extravagant improvisations. The organ transcription (BWV 594) of Vivaldi’s D major Violin Concerto (RV 208) is labelled as one of the first capriccios for an instrument other than the violin.¹³ Moreover, according to musicologist Manfred Bukofzer, the *La Capricciosa* partita of Buxtehude might have served as a model for the Goldberg Variations BWV 998.¹⁴

⁹ Whitmore, Philip J. “Towards an Understanding of the Capriccio.” In *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 113/1, London, 1988, pp. 47-50.

¹⁰ Schwandt, Eric. Op. cit.

¹¹ Op. cit.

¹² Whitmore, Philip J. Op. cit. p. 55.

¹³ Op. cit.

¹⁴ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Era*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1947, p. 264.

Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletissimo, BWV 992

Even though the “Capriccio on the Departure of the Beloved Brother” translation is accepted, the word *la lontananza* bears the sense of absence, with nostalgic overtones.¹⁵ Traditionally this work is linked to the older brother, Johann Jacob Bach’s (1682-1722) departure from Thuringia to Poland, where as an oboist he joined in 1704 the Swedish royal army of King Charles XII.¹⁶ In order to maintain this hypothesis, the Latin term *fratro* was modified to the Italian *fratello*.¹⁷ The *fratro* of the original title refers to fraternity in the sense of Christian friendship. Such relationship had Bach with Georg Erdmann, a schoolmate in Lüneburg at the St. Michael’s School, whom he called even two decades later in his letters as “Noble and most honored Sir and (if still permissible) esteemed Mr. Brother.”¹⁸ The capriccio was probably composed in 1702 to celebrate graduation and to say goodbye, Erdmann entering the diplomatic service, while Bach returned to Ohrdruf. This date is reinforced by the genesis of a similar work, *Capriccio in honorem Johann Christoph Bachii Ohrdruf [iensis] BWV 993* – an expression of devotement and homage to his very first music professor.¹⁹

From the Lüneburg period, and before the years of Arnstadt (1700-1707) date several other free, improvisatory, and variation-based works, such as *Praeludium, cum Fuga. ex. Gb. Pedaliter. per Joan. Sebast: Bachium BWV 535a*, *Praeludium ô Fantasia. Pedaliter. ex. Db. di Giovanne Seb. Bach BWV 549a* and *Toccatà in D minor In honorem delectissimi fratris Joh. Christ. Bach Ohrdruffiensis BWV 913*. The pretentious Latin subtitles could reflect first attempts in the search of compositional identity.²⁰

Analytical aspects

According to musicologist Manfred Bukofzer, the B flat major capriccio BWV 992 is a secular supplement of the *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger*

¹⁵ Richard D. Jones, Op. cit. p. 26.

¹⁶ The second son of Johann Ambrosius Bach. After the battle of Pultava, together with King Charles XII he found refuge in the Turkish city of Bender. Then at Constantinople Bach took lessons from Pierre-Gabriel Buffardin, flautist of the French ambassador. He retired in Stockholm as a court musician. (cf. David, Hans T. – Mendel, Arthur (ed.). *The New Bach Reader*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1999, pp. 289-290.)

¹⁷ David, Hans T. – Mendel, Arthur (ed.). *The New Bach Reader*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1999, p. 42.

¹⁸ Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Learned Musician*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 75.

¹⁹ Op. cit.

²⁰ Op. cit.

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Biblischer Historien (1700) by Kuhnau.²¹ The preface of these latter sonatas points out that in order to reach the main goal, i.e. musical representation via analogy, verbal description is needed as an intermediary between programmatic and musical content.²² To fulfill these requirements one might appeal to titles, subtitles, such as Bach in his capriccio.

1. *Arioso: Adagio. The adulation of friends to dissuade him from his journey*
[“*Arioso: Adagio. Ist eine Schmeichelung Freunde, um denselben von seiner Reise abzuhalten.*”]

Arioso is an intermediary discourse between recitativo and aria, neither too epic and definite, nor lyric and abstract. This friendly counselling falls musically into a free form, with a simple tonal plan circumscribing the tonic and dominant. Regarding embellishments, upper and lower appoggiaturas are used, which guarantee delicacy, and affection to performance, at least according to the French harpsichord masters.²³

E.g. 1



J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 1st movement, bb. 1-3

2. *A vision of several various calamities that might surprise him abroad*
[“*Ist eine Vorstellung unterschiedlicher Casuum, die ihm in der Fremde könnten vorkommen*”]

Ricercar-type fugue constructed exclusively on thematic appearances delimited by cadences. This type we find also in the first, C major fugue of the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The second movement of the capriccio is in G minor and can be reconstructed in the following formal scheme:

²¹ Bukofzer, Manfred. Op. cit. p. 273.

²² Jones, Richard D., Op. cit. p. 27.

²³ Pirro, André. *The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach*. (trans. Joe Armstrong). Rowman & Littlefield, Plymouth, 2014, p. 430.

Table 1

Exposition					Segment 1				
Dux	Comes	Dux	Comes	cadence	Dux	Comes	Dux	Comes	cad.
G minor	C minor	G minor	C minor	F minor V.	F minor	B minor	F minor	B minor	E flat minor V
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Segment 2					Coda		
Dux	Comes	Dux	Comes	cad.	Dux	Comes	cad.
E flat minor	A flat minor	E flat minor	A flat minor	F minor V	F minor	B flat minor	C minor VII ⁶ V ₃ ⁴ I ₃ [♯]
11	12	13	14	15-16	16	17	18-19

E.g. 2

J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 2nd movement, bb. 1-6

3. *Adagiosissimo. The general lament of the friends* [*Adagiosissimo. Ist ein allgemeines Lamento der Freunde*]

Variation on an ostinato bass. This bass type from Monteverdi's *Lamento della ninfa* (1638) on primordially connects with the world of music drama.²⁴ Hence, it is called lament bass, a variant of the chaconne-bass. In Baroque, both chaconne and passacaglia were suite dances, distinguished by their character. According to the definition given in *Musicalishes Lexicon* (1732) by Johann Gottfried Walther, passacaglia is almost exclusively a

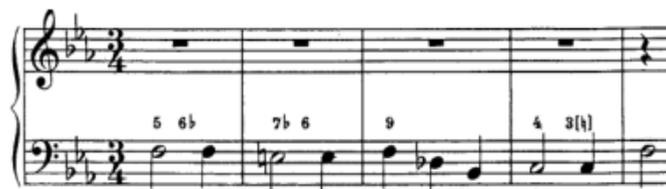
²⁴ Jones, Richard D. Op. cit. p. 29.

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minor-keyed dance, more solemn and less animated than the chaconne.²⁵ Probably the model of Bach's *Adagiosissimo* might have been the *Il lamento dolorosissimo fatto da gli assistenti* movement of the 6th *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger Biblischer Historien* by Kuhnau, both in F minor.²⁶

The lament bass of the *Adagiosissimo* is made up of 4 bars and generates 11 variations:

E.g. 3



J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 3rd movement, bb. 1-5

The ostinato appears unchanged in the first three variations (bb. 5-17). In the other variations it bears rhythmic-melodical changes such as crotchets (var. 10, bb. 41-44), two crotchets and a quaver (var. 4, bb. 17-21), two crotchets separated by a pause (var. 5 bb. 21-25 and var. 7, bb. 29-32), quavers (var. 6 m. 25-29, var. 8 m. 33-37, var. 9 m. 37-41). The golden section is present in bar 29, and marks the beginning of the *passus duriusculus* of the upper voice, echoed then in the bass (E.g. 4). The figure of *suspiratio* is almost uninterruptedly kept in the upper voice during the whole movement. By means of these rhetoric figures with *affectus tristitiae*, this F minor lament represents the expressive climax of the capriccio.

E.g. 4



J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 3rd movement, beginning of var. 8, bb. 29-36

²⁵ Pirro, André. Op. cit. p. 433.

²⁶ Jones, Richard D. Op. cit. p. 29.

4. *Friends come, but when they realize that it could not be otherwise, they say goodbye to him* [“*Allhier kommen die Freunde (weil sie doch sehen, daß es anders nicht sein kann) und nehmen Abschied*”]

It has recitativo accompagnato function due to the epic character of the subtitle, broken chords and tonal instability, which circumscribe the ‘zones’ of E flat major, A flat major and B flat major, G and D minor, with final cadence in F major. Metaphorically, each key could symbolize a friend.

E.g. 5

4. Allhier kommen die Freunde (weil sie doch sehen, daß es anders nicht sein kann) und nehmen Abschied.

J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 4th movement

5. *Aria di Postiglione. Allegro poco*

This movement together with the finale evoke the horn, which signals the post arrival from the friend. The anapests and octave leaps configure the signal, which, combined with changes in register suggest the approaching and distancing of the messenger. For the first time appears an animated tempo, *Allegro poco* and reappears the main key, B flat major. The aria has a strophic configuration.

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6. *Fuga all'imitatione di Posta*

Besides the octave leaps kept from the previous movement, in this fugue the horn is evoked by its most familiar musical sign, i.e. ascending perfect fifths. Regarding form, it is a three-voice fugue with a modulatory theme and tonal Comes on the dominant.

E.g. 6



J. S. Bach, Capriccio BWV 992, 6th movement, bb. 42-48

The fugue seems to surrender exclusively to the composer's fantasy, the obsessive repetitions of the themes and tonalities, like hyperbola, lead towards the emotional height, the main theme in D minor.

Possible interpretations

The capriccio can be interpreted in terms of musical persuasion. However, one without success as the *fratello diletissimo* (might he be Johann Jacob Bach or Georg Erdmann) had left and eventually will send signals by post. The conviction efforts of the friends seem a Sisyphean task. During their arguments they got back to their initial point, they are captivated in a circle – symbolized by the tonal 'excursion' of the capriccio: B flat major (I) – G minor (II) – F minor (III) – E flat major-A flat major-G minor-D minor-F minor (IV) – B flat major (V, VI).

The Capriccio's program offers a psychological interpretation as well, however, from the perspective of 20th-century theories. According to these, parting from the beloved, even without his/her necessary death still creates traumas like those provoked by death. In her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defines the five stages of this process: denial,

anger, negotiation, depression, and acceptance.²⁷ We might recall these steps in the *Capriccio BWV 992*. In the first movement, by discouragement the friends in fact deny the importance and necessity of the departure. Then, in the next movement, in anger, they make up all kinds of disasters thus trying to negotiate. The *Lamento* (3rd movement) obviously relates to depression, while the *Abschied* to acceptance (4th movement). However, Bach does not stop here, but concludes in the hope of receiving news, if not of a future meeting – the signals of the postal horn. According to George Pollock, men aim to fill in the emptiness created by lost and mourning through the act of creation.²⁸ Such function might have Bach’s capriccio, a monument of friendship.

Stylistic conclusions

The *Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletissimo BWV 992* probably dates from 1702 and incorporates multiple influences:

- German harpsichord music: *ricercar* and fugue writing were considered as synonyms to *capriccio*.
- the *capriccios* of Froberger: expressions of the composer’s affects.
- Kuhnau’s *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger Biblischer Historien*: Bach’s *capriccio* as its secular complement.
- military music: *Aria di Postiglione* and *Fuga all’imitatione di Posta* movements; the only possible reference and evocation of the Swedish army which had been joined by Bach’s older brother, Johann Jacob.
- Italian dance and suites: the presence of the *chaconne* in the 3rd movement.
- *Camerata fiorentina: dramma per musica*, by the movements’ programmatic content, character, denomination, and order, i.e., I. *Arioso* – II. ‘*recitativo*’ – III. *Lamento* – IV. ‘*recitativo*’ – V. *Aria* – VI. *Fuga*.

Perspectives

Sometimes by farewell, new perspectives open, and other possible influences and models become clear within family for a father’s son:

²⁷ Agmon, Eytan. “Beethoven’s op. 81a and the psychology of loss.” In *Music theory online*, 2/4, s. I., Unites States, May 1996, pp. 2-3.

²⁸ Op. cit.

Table 2

Composer	Date of composition	Title	Observations
Johann Sebastian Bach	? 1702	<i>Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletissimo, BWV 992</i>	portrait of Georg Erdmann / Johann Jacob Bach?
	? 1702-1704	<i>Capriccio in honorem Johann Christoph Bachii Ohrdruf [iensis] BWV 993</i>	homages / portraits of Johann Christoph Bach?
	? 1708	<i>Toccatà in D minor In honorem delectissimi fratris Joh. Christ. Bach Ohrdruffiensis BWV 913</i>	
Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach	1754-1757	<i>L'Ally Rupalich Wq. 117/27</i>	part of the <i>Petites Pièces pour le Clavecin</i> ; self-portrait or portrait of a family member
		<i>La Capricieuse Wq. 117/33</i>	part of the <i>Petites Pièces pour le Clavecin</i>
	1781	<i>Abschied von meinem Silbermannischen Clavier H. 272</i>	
	1787	<i>Fantasy in F sharp minor "C. P. E. Bachs Empfindungen", H. 300</i>	probably his last harpsichord work

Portrait – homage – Abschied related works of the Bach family

Or outside of the family, in a composer generation distance: might the *Capriccio* BWV 992 be a model for Beethoven's famous *Sonata op. 81a Les adieux*, a memory of the friendship of Archduke Rudolf?²⁹

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²⁹ Op. cit. p. 1.

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