

## HARPSICHORD OR PIANO? DEVELOPMENT OF BACH'S "ITALIAN CONCERTO" BWV 971 PERFORMANCE IN MODERN MUSICAL PRACTICE

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**SUMMARY.** This article compares piano and harpsichord interpretations of J. S. Bach's *Italian Concerto in F Major*, BWV 971. I've often wondered "How to play Bach's music correctly?" This question stemmed from historical authenticity in interpretation. Authentic performances of Bach's compositions raise a variety of problems regarding sound, technique, and style. This is due to the fact that Bach composed during a period in history when the organ, harpsichord and the clavichord were the primary keyboard instruments. It is possible to perceive and experience Bach's music in a fundamentally different way depending on whether it is played on the piano or the harpsichord. Because dynamics cannot be altered and there is no pedal, the harpsichord demands a crisper and more distinct polyphony between voices. Articulation and ornamentation are crucial for clarity on the harpsichord, and phrases need to be formed by agogic and rhythmic shaping. When playing the piano, the performer has the ability to express themselves freely through the use of dynamics. A more expressive sound that is more closely related to vocal emotion is possible. When there is an excessive amount of pedalization or an extremely passionate attack, there is a possibility that the polyphony will become distorted.

**Keywords:** harpsichord, piano, Italian concerto, authenticity, early music

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## Introduction

According to Daniel E. Freeman<sup>3</sup>, before Bach, a minimum of six composers of Italian descent created solo concertos for keyboard and orchestra in the Italian style: Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Francesco Durante, Giovanni Battista Martini, Domenico Auletta the Elder, Giuseppe Sammartini, and Giovanni Benedetto Platti.

The first composer is credited with writing the first Italian concerto, which was composed for two harpsichords and a string quartet in the key of C major. The manuscript for this piece was discovered in the Rotterdam newspaper in 1939, as stated by Marvin E. Paymer. The author examines the authenticity of this work in his doctoral dissertation, writing that it “must be considered authentic by our criteria”<sup>4</sup> at the conclusion of his analysis. Therefore, this piece is still considered to be one of the oldest Italian concertos.

The *Italian Concerto* transposes concepts of this style into a solo harpsichord work, employing a register opposition that mimics the *tutti* and *solli* alternating characteristic of the Baroque concerto. This style originates from the Vivaldian aesthetic, noted for its clear formal structure, sequential development of musical phrases, and dynamic contrasts across sections. In this work, Bach exhibits a profound comprehension of the Italian style and the capacity to modify it for a soloistic setting, all while preserving the tenets of Baroque musical rhetoric.

## 1. Distinctive Italian characteristics in Bach's keyboard works

Published in 1735 as the first section of *Clavier-Übung II*, the *Italian Concerto* BWV 971 ranks among Bach's most frequently executed pieces for harpsichord with two manuals, alongside the *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988, and the *French Overture in B minor*, BWV 831<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the aforementioned compositions, Bach opted for the *Italian Concerto* to align more closely with the prevailing galant style of the era. The juxtaposition of the *Italian Concerto* and the *French Overture* in *Clavier-Übung II* illustrates Bach's musical interpretation of the stereotypical competition between two prevalent genres of the period, both of which evolved in reaction to the rising popularity of the Galant style.

<sup>3</sup> Freeman, Daniel E. “The Earliest Italian Keyboard Concertos.” In *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1985, pp. 121–45. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/763792>. (8 Mar. 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Marvin E. Peymer. “The Instrumental Music Attributed to Giovanni Battista Pergolesi: A Study in Authenticity”, PhD. diss., City University of New York, 1977, p. 272

<sup>5</sup> <https://breznika.com/article/johann-sebastian-bach-12-the-most-beautiful-piano-pieces/4619> (9 Mar. 2025)

The artistic influence of the *Italian Concerto* is undoubtedly derived from the composer Antonio Vivaldi, whose works Bach examined and transcribed extensively. Bach's transcriptions of Vivaldi's works include *L'estro armonico*, whose concertos have been enlightening for numerous musicians. Bach encountered Vivaldi's music upon his arrival in Weimar. He presumably acquired copies of Vivaldi's concertos through the Prince of Weimar, who had journeyed to Netherlands. Bach transcribed concerti op. 3, 9, and 12 for solo harpsichord, while the concerti for two violins op. 3, op. 8, and op. 11 were transcribed for double-manual organ with pedalboard.

The *Italian Concerto* BWV 971, a quintessential composition for solo harpsichord, exemplifies the Italian solo concerto paradigm. In this work, Bach adeptly crafts an orchestral illusion solely with the harpsichord, oscillating between "soloistic" segments and expansive portions that imply the presence of a *tutti*. This design originates from the *ritornello* style established by Vivaldi, wherein a principal theme recurs intermittently, establishing a balance between contrast and coherence.

### **1.1. The ritornello principle**

In his paper "Some Thoughts on Italian Elements in Certain Music of Johann Sebastian Bach," Peter Williams<sup>6</sup> contended that Julius August Philipp Spitta introduced the concept of correlation in Bach's evolution of the ritornello form, especially within the solo concerto form, in 1873. Nonetheless, the ritornello was already evident in Bach's early compositions, encompassing a variety of genres such as arias, solo sonatas, ensemble concertos, and organ chorales.

Also, Johann Kuhnau influenced the young Bach, especially when the Italian sonata was more popular over the French suite. In the sonatas BWV 963 and BWV 967, Bach exhibited Italian influences. The assessment of a ritornello form's maturity relies on elements like motivic growth and episode coherence; yet cross-genre comparisons pose challenges.

Bach explored the ritornello form in his organ compositions during the Weimar period, namely in toccatas and chorales. Comparing both forms is intricate, as chorales incorporate an inherent ritornello through the repeating of melodic lines, whereas toccatas employ distinct thematic returns.

In Weimar, Bach encountered Albinoni's concertos and perhaps examined Italian influences via associations with Telemann and Pisendel.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, Peter. "Some Thoughts on Italian Elements in Certain Music of Johann Sebastian Bach." In *Recercare*, vol. 11, 1999, pp. 185–200. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41701304>. (8 Mar. 2025).

The extended Bach's fugues, with the recurrence of the principal theme in the central sections, illustrated another way in which the ritornello shaped his works. This structure is particularly evident in the finale of *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4*, reminiscent of the fusion of fugue and concerto found in Albinoni's works.

In *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, several fugues exhibit a distinct ritornello structure, but others straddle the line between ritornello and alternative forms. *Sonata BWV 963* demonstrates that Bach was already investigating the ritornello in many manners. Nonetheless, the precise impacts of Italian models remain challenging to ascertain.

Bach used Italian features, including themes presented in open octaves, episodes derived from broken chords, and certain sequential patterns. The concluding movement of the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5* is not a cadenza; rather, it is an episode constructed on ritornello ideas.

Bach employed Italian terminology not alone for tempo but also to evoke Italian stylistic elements. The *Toccatà, Adagio* and *Fugue BWV 564* features an Italian *Adagio* characterized by an *arioso* theme accompanied by a pizzicato bass. The overabundant incorporation of Italian terminology in *BWV 565* prompts inquiries regarding its legitimacy.

The authenticity of the ritornello in the Italian concert form is crucial for comprehending the evolution of Baroque music. In Bach's work, this form is not adopted mechanically but rather reinvented and assimilated into a distinctive style, enhanced by Italian and German influences.

The *Italian Concerto BWV 971* exemplifies Bach's assimilation and transformation of this concept. This work emulates an orchestral concerto, employing the ritornello to organize the interaction between the *tutti* and the *solì*. The themes of the ritornello are explicitly articulated and reappear intermittently, producing a sense of cohesion akin to Vivaldi's concertos. Bach, however, enhances the form with intricate polyphony and a more sophisticated motivic discourse than that of Italian composers.

## 1.2. The Galant style

Although the names "baroque" and "classical" have been retrospectively applied to classify 17th and 18th-century music, Bach's contemporaries were acquainted with the concept of *galant*, a style distinguished by clarity, balance, and simplicity. While Bach's musical language is conventionally linked to the baroque style, specific compositions, such as the *Italian Concerto*, exhibit an incorporation of galant elements.

The *Art of Fugue* exemplifies Bach's contrapuntal discipline, in stark contrast to the more jovial and approachable style of the Galant period. In the *Italian Concerto*, Bach incorporates elements typical of this style, such

as symmetrical phrases, distinct harmonic structures, and a more transparent texture, clearly differentiating between melody and accompaniment. In contrast to the approach of the late Baroque, which relies on the ongoing evolution of the subject material, Bach here employs distinctly defined and rationally structured melodic processes.

The first and third sections of the concerto are designed in rondo form, exhibiting an architectural clarity characteristic of the galant style. The third section features a comprehensive summary of the episodic content, echoing the sonata form that would later dominate the galante concertos of the late 18th century.

The *Italian Concerto* is characterized by a leisurely harmonic pace, simpler progressions, and a distinct tone shift, in contrast to the intricate and chromatic manner of other works of Bach. In the second section, the *Andante*, there exists an expressive melody influenced by the Italian *bel canto* tradition, highlighting the contemporary elements in Bach's works.

## 2. Comparative analysis

### ***1<sup>st</sup> Movement – no tempo signature***

A significant element of dynamics in Bach's keyboard compositions is the distinctly articulated and abrupt dynamic shifts. His keyboard compositions lack terminology like "crescendo" or "decrescendo" because of the constraints of the instruments available during that period. The subtleties employed by Bach in the *Italian Concerto* serve merely as a "guide" for the utilization of harpsichord manuals.

From the very beginning we notice the *forte* indication, so for harpsichord must be used the first manual, coupled with the second one, for a more richer sound.

E. g. 1



J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 1-7.

The first chord has always been a problem; it has to be arpeggiated or not? From my point of view, on the harpsichord, a chord is arpeggiated when we want to emphasize it, to give it importance, to make it deeper. We can do the same thing on the piano, even if the instrument helps us to play louder, in *forte*. So on both piano and harpsichord, the first chord can be played arpeggiated. Also, on harpsichord, the performer can add notes to the chord, for a fuller sound.

This section represents the *tutti* and has an energetic and vibrant character. One can notice here full resonant chords, big leaps, as octave or sixths leaps and a constant movement in the bass line, reminiscent of basso continuo.

The beat remains consistent until m. 27, but then the presence of two quarter notes signifies a cessation in the rhythm and, concurrently, in the musical narrative, culminating in a robust cadence VI-V-I.

### E. g. 2



#### J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 25-30.

Subsequent to this cadenza, the solo part emerges. This passage features a distinct accompaniment of eighth notes, with the soprano line notated in a higher range with a sixteenth-note rhythm and occasional ornamentation. These attributes impart a significantly more expressive and dramatic coloratura to the soprano line.

### E. g. 3



#### J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 31-36.

The distinction between forte and piano will be executed suddenly in *piano*, without a *decrescendo*, to highlight the *tutti-solo* effect. In this section, the left hand will perform on the upper manual of the harpsichord, while the right hand will remain on the lower manual to execute the solo line as effectively as feasible.

It is crucial to highlight that contemporary practice favors the equalization of all rhythmic groups, particularly those containing the smallest note values (e.g., demisemiquaver). In Baroque practice, the situation is entirely reversed. Groups of thirty-sharps will be executed as ornaments, hence they will not be performed with precise evenness or tallied. A similar instance occurs in measures 37-38, where groups of thirty-second notes will be performed at an accelerated tempo, since they serve as an ornamentation. This fact come from the Baroque practice called "notes inegales" (unequal notes), a principally Baroque performance practice of applying long-short rhythms to pairs of notes written as equal<sup>7</sup>.

E. g. 4



J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 37-39.

In m. 129 from the example below, the performer should be played with the left hand on the top manual and with the right hand on the bottom manual. This way, the melody line is much more emphasized than the accompaniment.

E. g. 5



J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 126-129.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.freemusicdictionary.com/definition/notes-inegales/> (11 Mar. 2025)

Differences in dynamics as well as in sound texture will be established by *touché* on the piano and by changing manuals on the harpsichord. In this part, the textural difference between *tutti* and *solo* sections should be emphasized.

In the example below, measures 46-52 are the solo part, so it will be played on the upper manual on the harpsichord, and on the piano with a more airy *touché*, and measures 53-55 are the tutti part. On the harpsichord, the performer will move on the lower manual with both hands, and on the piano he will use a deeper *touché*, imitating the full sound of a orchestra or a chamber ensemble.

**E. g. 6**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 46-55.**

Another important aspect is fingering. In mm. 5-6, normally piano players would use more fingers, for example, 4-3, 3-2. On the harpsichord we can use historical fingering, so we can use only 3-2, thus also emphasizing the sigh effect that the motive calls for.

**E. g. 7**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 1st mov., mm. 31-36.**

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Movement - Andante**

The term *Andante* means “going” or “walking” forward. It is very important that the performer will count every beat in this manner, like walking in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature.



A significant component is the left hand's ostinato, which mimics the heartbeat. The left hand's touch on the piano should be delicate and ethereal. Achieving this on the piano is challenging, since the performer must maintain a high level of finger control to avoid unintended accents that disrupt the tranquility of the ostinato.

Pedaling should be as effortless as the *touche*. Depressing the pedal excessively, particularly with low register notes, will cause the two repeated D's to obscure the pulse of the heart effect.

Pedaling on harpsichord is possible only with the fingers, using the *overlegato* mechanism. In this second movement it can be used on the first two melodic lines of the bass, in thirds.

Conversely, on the harpsichord, the left hand will utilize the upper manual to emulate the piano's sonority, allowing the expressiveness of the melodic line to emanate from the lower manual. The harpsichord doesn't require control of the *touche*, but the projection of sound and the right musical character in the mind can easily be emphasized on this instrument. Also, a more controlled touch on the keys can help to make the sound mellow.

E. g. 8



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 2nd movement, mm. 1-4.**

The performer's ingenuity is particularly challenged by the instrumentation. In the initial two measures, the performer may envision three melodic bass lines: the first two lines could be executed by a violin and a viola, while the third line symbolizes the heartbeats.

Opposed to the French style, in the Italian style is written out. Here, we have all the ornaments written in the score, down to the shortest note value.

The weight of this component is preserving the equilibrium between *rubato* and non-*rubato*. While the left hand sustains the ostinato rhythm in the eighth notes movement, the right hand engages in spontaneous writing. This part ought to be unrestricted. The performer may postpone specific beats or notes within the measure to accentuate their significance. This is particularly crucial on the harpsichord, since dynamic aspects are absent; thus, articulation and *rubato* are vital to reestablish the expressiveness and beauty of this section.

The performer can also approach the principle of *notes inégales*, a principle often used in Baroque music practice. This principle gives vocality and expressiveness to the melodic line and can be used on both piano and harpsichord.

On the piano, the melodic line on the right hand, which is inspired by the Italian *bel canto* technique, can be emphasized by a deeper, more sung *touche*. / On harpsichord, this line will be emphasized by the choice of the first manual, the lower one, as indicated in the score by the dynamic *forte* and *piano*.

The final crucial component is ornamentation. I will specifically concentrate on the appoggiaturas. An appoggiatura is a dissonant sound that resolves into a consonant one. The performer can amplify the dissonant sound on the piano, sustaining it, until resolving into a consonant sound with a decrescendo. This will enhance the musical discourse and provide the necessary vocal quality.

The dissonant sound on the harpsichord in an appoggiatura cannot be amplified, but it can be postponed. Consequently, the dissonant note will be postponed, and the performer will try to connect the dissonant sound to the consonant sound by an over legato. This produces the decrescendo effect on harpsichord.

**E. g. 9**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 2nd mov., m. 8.**

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Movement - Presto**

This part, in rondo form, is characterized by vivacity and virtuosity. The rhythmic liveliness is very important to suggest, from the very beginning, through the syncopation of the right hand.

**E. g. 10**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 3rd mov., mm. 1-5.**

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An essential aspect to note is the articulation, which is notably diverse in this section. In measure 3, there is a form of rhythmic articulation, wherein the initial eighth note of the group of four eighth notes is separate from the remaining.

E. g. 11



J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 2nd mov., mm. 1-3.

Another example of articulation is in mm. 9-10, where the last note in the eighth notes group will be distinct, not the first:

E. g. 12



J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 2nd mov., mm. 6-10.

The weight of this part lies in the very abrupt character changes, but also in the dynamics. On the piano, the performer will need very precise dynamic changes in both hands. In most cases, the right hand plays *piano*, and the left hand *forte*, and after four bars, it changes. This can be hard to execute the first time, so it requires special attention.

On the harpsichord, this change of dynamics is even harder to execute because of the changing manuals. The performer will have to practice each movement of the sudden change from the top to the bottom manual and vice versa. Sometimes it is even harder, because one hand plays on the lower manual, the other hand plays on the upper manual, and suddenly they have to switch positions.

**E. g. 13**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 3rd mov., mm. 23-34.**

Bach implements polyphonic discourse in this movement. At the piano, these sections can be emphasized by the touche, but on the harpsichord they will be emphasized by the speed of attack and the duration of the notes. The notes to be emphasized will be longer.

**E. g. 14**



**J. S. Bach, *Italian Concerto* in F Major, BWV 971, 3rd mov., mm. 17-22.**

**Conclusions**

This article highlights the profound impact of the Italian style on Johann Sebastian Bach's *Italian Concerto* BWV 971, as well as the interpretative challenges this work poses in the context of period and modern instruments. Bach succeeds in translating the principles of the Italian concerto, in particular the structure of the ritornello and the opposition between tutti and soli, into a piece conceived exclusively for the harpsichord. This fusion demonstrates both his ability to assimilate external influences and his skill in adapting them to a language of his own, balancing formal clarity with profound expressivity.

An essential aspect addressed in the article is the difference between harpsichord and piano performance, each instrument having its own constraints and expressive possibilities. The elements set out in this article are part of my own artistic experience. By studying both instruments, I have been able to find a multi-cultural approach to this work. The harpsichord requires clear articulation and abundant use of ornamentation to compensate for the lack of dynamic variation. The piano, on the other hand, allows greater control over dynamics and a lyricism closer to vocal expression, but requires special attention to maintain clarity of melodic lines and stylistic authenticity.

Despite Bach's style being perceived as conservative or antiquated during his era, the *Italian Concerto* demonstrates its susceptibility to contemporary influences. The work exemplifies a synthesis of Baroque contrapuntal expertise and the emotional lucidity of the galant style, underscoring Bach's capacity to incorporate contemporary aspects into his musical vernacular.

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