

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

THE MUSICAL OFFERING, BWV 1079

In May 1747, Bach visited Berlin and Potsdam at the invitation of King Frederick II of Prussia. The king, a great lover of music and a fine flutist, put the cantor's extraordinary talents to the test; as soon as Bach arrived at his palace, Frederick had him try out various keyboard instruments, and in particular the seven pianofortes that Gottfried Silbermann had just made for him, and of which he was very proud. Frederick next proposed a theme on which he asked Bach to improvise a fugue in three voices and then one in six voices. Bach declined the latter challenge, explaining that the king's theme was not suitable for such treatment.

On his return to Leipzig, however, Bach composed for Frederick *The Musical Offering* in which he explored all the contrapuntal possibilities of the royal theme and included, as requested, a six-voice fugue, one of the most beautiful ever written. In his preface he declared with ironic servility that the only reason for the existence of the work was "to treat the royal theme in all its perfection, and to make it known to the world."

The Musical Offering comprises both a three-part and a six-part ricercar — the old name for a fugue — for keyboard; ten canons of diverse forms, some written explicitly as riddles; and a trio sonata for flute, violin, and continuo. This trio sonata, one of the very few in which Bach actually followed the form's traditional structure, is very contrapuntal and harmonically rich but, since it is intended to please as well as to instruct, it makes notable use of the highly melodic *galant* style, which Frederick preferred above all others. With the exception of the sonata and two of the canons, Bach does not specify the instruments to be used, and the only thing that unifies the work is the use in all its parts of the king's theme.

In June 1747 Bach joined a learned musical society directed by Lorenz Mizler. Each year he had to prepare either a theoretical communication or a work especially demonstrative of contrapuntal skill for his colleagues in this society. It is probable that his goal in composing *The Musical Offering* was not just to honor or impress Frederick; the care with which the work was engraved suggests that Bach also planned it as his contribution for 1748 to the Mizler society.

Masterful, ingenious, this work is one of noblest peaks of the art of polyphony, equaled only by Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, written two years later. The King of Prussia's musical knowledge was insufficient to plumb the intellectual depths of this work, yet its density never prevails over its great sensitivity, emotion, and clarity.

Translated by Sean McCutcheon