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## Bach's B Minor Flute Sonata: A Study of Six Recorded Interpretations

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BACH'S B MINOR FLUTE SONATA:  
A STUDY OF  
SIX RECORDED INTERPRETATIONS

by

Edwin P. Sabrack, Jr.

A Paper  
Submitted to the  
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in partial fulfillment  
of the  
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## INTRODUCTION

The lack of knowledge and understanding of the performance practice of the early eighteenth century can lead to faulty and ill-conceived ideas regarding the interpretation of Bach's flute sonatas. Problems of tempo, articulation, phrasing, dynamics, and ornamentation can overwhelm the student approaching these works for the first time. Luckily, the great flutists of our time have given us a permanent documentation of their interpretations of this music by committing to record their performances. A diligent study of these performances, (in this case, the Sonata in B Minor), can guide the student to make intelligent decisions for his own playing of these works and other music of the same period. If the listener also has some basis to judge the historical validity of these recordings he will also learn which of the world-renowned performers give attention to details of correct interpretation rather than exploiting with various eccentricities a "new and different" or "fresh" approach to important staples of the literature for the flute.

The purpose of this paper is to examine six recorded interpretations of J.S. Bach's Sonata in B Minor, principally in the areas of tempo, articulation, and ornamentation. The recordings to be discussed are those by Julius Baker, flute, and Sylvia Marlowe, harpsichord, (Decca DX 113); Samuel Baron and Louis Bagger, (Musical Heritage Society OR 303/304); Karl Bobzien and Margarete Scharitzer, (Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft ARC 73225); Maxence



Larrieu and Rafael Puyana, (Philips S-C 71 AX 203); Jean-Pierre Rampal and Robert Veyron-Lacroix, (Odyssey Y2 31925); and Elaine Shaffer and George Malcolm, (Angel S 36337). It should be emphasized that this discussion will not consider the technical accuracy and performing capabilities of the artists studied; rather, it will be centered around those artists' insights and solutions to the interpretation problems inherent in Bach's music.

## PERFORMER'S BACKGROUNDS

Before examining the various interpretations it might be informative to briefly mention the backgrounds of the flutists themselves.

Julius Baker, currently principal flutist of the New York Philharmonic, has also served in this capacity with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the CBS Symphony, and the Bach Aria Group. A native of Cleveland, Mr. Baker graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music and he now teaches at the Juilliard School of Music. His extensive list of recordings includes representative music from the Baroque through the twentieth century.

Samuel Baron is currently the flute soloist of the Bach Aria Group after serving for many years as flutist in the New York Woodwind Quintet. Baron's versatile background includes conducting the New York Brass Ensemble and teaching at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. This Juilliard graduate's recordings include much new music, some of which was written especially for him.

Evidently little is known regarding flutist Karl Bobzien. Burks<sup>1</sup> tells us nothing besides the fact that his only recordings are those of the Bach sonatas.

Maxence Larrieu studied with Joseph Rampal and Gaston Crunelle, Jean-Pierre Rampal's teachers. He is presently soloist of the Opera

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<sup>1</sup>Burks, Aldine K., *Follow the Pipers*. Westfield, N.Y.: Aldine K. Burks. Pp. 8, 119.

Comique in Paris and conductor of the Larrieu Instrumental Ensemble. He has toured throughout Europe, Japan, and the United States and has recorded masterworks of the Baroque and Classical periods.

Jean-Pierre Rampal has been doing concert tours around the world since 1947. He has recorded more of the literature of all periods than any other flutist. Many contemporary pieces were written for him and he himself has published editions of many of the representative works for the flute.

Elaine Shaffer, a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, has recorded music of Bach, Telemann, Mozart, and Copland. In 1955 she married conductor Efrem Kurtz. Elaine Shaffer died in 1973.

Throughout the remainder of this paper Julius Baker will be referred to by the abbreviation JB; Samuel Baron by SB; Karl Bobzien, KB; Maxence Larrieu, ML; Jean-Pierre Rampal, JR; and Elaine Shaffer, ES.

## TEMPO

Sources agree that during the first half of the eighteenth century there was a traditional method of arriving at the correct performance tempo of a piece of music of that time. By examining the time signature, note values, and Italian markings, the Baroque performer could evidently find the approximate speed at which the composer intended his music to be played. According to Rothschild<sup>1</sup>:

"It must be admitted, however, that the markings of the composers of the 17th century and of their great successors Bach and Handel are not readily apparent to us, for they were almost in the nature of a code. A great number of conventions and rules, which were faithfully observed by composers, gave very exact directions to the performer."

For the present we shall consider Bach's B Minor Flute Sonata as containing four movements even though the presto and gigue sections are usually discussed as together comprising the third movement; (the measure numbers of the fourth movement will be referred to as 84 through 147). Following Rothschild's<sup>2</sup> study we can see that the metronome markings for the first movement should be ♩ = 40-60 and the third movement is to be played ♩ = 80-120. He seems to suggest the unlikely tempo of ♩ = 160-240, (♩ = c. 53-80), for the last movement and leaves us to decide for ourselves whether ♩ = 80-120 or ♩ = 40-

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<sup>1</sup>Rotschild, Fritz, The Lost Tradition in Music: Rhythm and Tempo in J.S. Bach's Time. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953. Pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>loc. cit., especially Pp. 6, 8, 15, 17.

60 is correct for the second. Bodky<sup>1</sup> gives  $\text{♩} = \pm 100$  as the appropriate speed for the third movement and indicates  $\text{♩} = \pm 60$ ,  $\text{♩} = 40$ , and  $\text{♩} = 120$  for movements similar to the first, second and fourth respectively. Fenley<sup>2</sup> supports "a simple relationship of tempos of the various movements. For example, if we use the eighth note as a basic unit, the complete relationship of tempos would be as follows: Movement I: MM  $\text{♩} = 120$ ; Movement II: MM  $\text{♩} = 60$ ; Movement III: MM  $\text{♩} = 120$ ; last part of Movement III: MM  $\text{♩} [\text{sic}] = 120$ ."

The reader will note that of the three sets of tempi mentioned some are quite suitable to the music under discussion while others are unthinkable; and although the scholars might concur that Bach intended his movements to be played at particular speeds there remains some controversy as to what really are the correct tempi.

By multiplying the number of beats in each movement by sixty, then dividing the result by the length (in seconds) of each performance, we can find the approximate tempi taken by each of the flutists recorded. These figures, (rounded off), are found in Table I.

The margin of speed in performance is a significant one. In the first movement 53 beats per minute is 21% slower than the fastest tempo, 67! In the second, third, and fourth movements, the percentages of difference are 15%, 12%, and 15% respectively. It can be seen that in matters of tempi only ML and JR resemble each other; SB and

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<sup>1</sup>Bodky, Erwin, The Interpretation of Bach's Keyboard Works. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. Pp. 100-145, 354.

<sup>2</sup>Fenley, J. Franklin, "Performance Notes on the Bach B Minor Flute Sonata." The Instrumentalist, XXVIII. (December 1973), p. 52.

Table I

Tempi of Movements of Six Recordings of Bach's B Minor Flute Sonata

	JB	SB	KB	ML	JR	ES
Mvmt. I	67	61	60	61	63	53
Mvmt. II	61	51	54	45	42	42
Mvmt. III	114	111	103	117	113	107
Mvmt. IV	124	122	119	111	112	106

KB differ in their choices of speed for the third movement only.

Although ML's and JR's similarities (in otherwise completely different performances) can be viewed as coincidental, it is interesting to remember that they both had the same teachers.

JB's interpretation is overall the fastest of the lot. His conception of the first movement is alone in its light, almost bouncy character. Likewise, his largo e dolce is the only one that moves along like a well-oiled machine; there is little time for sentimental indulgence here. His third and fourth movements are played with technical brilliance.

At the other end of the spectrum is ES, who, in this writer's opinion, gives a ponderous, introspective performance. Her first movement carries with it a modicum of unassuming strength as it drives steadily along. The tempo for her interpretation of the second movement (which she shares with JR) appears to be very slow, especially when compared to one of the faster recordings. Her third and fourth

movements do not concentrate on virtuosity but on the logical beauty of the line. The excitement that is lost is compensated for by the importance that each note receives.

Other flutists decide to take the middle ground. In the first movement SB, KB, ML, and JR all hover around 62 beats per minute. SB and KB, (a minority to ML, JR, and ES in this case), take an in-between tempo. 'As for the third movement, all the flutists stay within four beats a minute of JB (ML plays faster) or ES (KB is slower.) Performance speeds of the final movement are also more evenly distributed although SB and KB seem to favor the faster side. If majority rule is of some importance among world-renowned performers, we have some basis for judgement regarding the "correct" tempo to choose. Nevertheless, a statement that Bodky<sup>1</sup> makes at the end of his discussion might serve us here:

"Whether we assigned every piece, without error, to the correct and only group to which it belongs is a matter that should not be of too great concern to anybody. Interpretive genius can do miracles in suggesting speed while playing relatively slowly, and vice versa. The decisive thing is always to find the 'true affect' of a piece from the 'various types of notes.' Whoever has acquired this knowledge, through 'extensive experience and the ability to judge well,' will be the first to agree that dictatorial metronome marks are never an ultimate goal."

One more aspect should be mentioned before dismissing the area of tempo--namely, the employment of ritardandos in Bach's music. To simplify matters we can again allow our authority, Bodky<sup>2</sup>, to

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<sup>1</sup>op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>loc. cit., footnote, Pp. 41, 42.

summarize concerning this matter:

"There can be no doubt...that a ritardando at the end of a piece was common practice...How much one should slow down, unfortunately, cannot be defined exactly...In general we may have the right to say that many modern performers...overdo the ritardandos considerably. Slowing down with every cadence is one of the worst but most widespread habits."

Discussing the movements individually, all flutists slow down at the end of the first movement--JB, SB, and ML only slightly; ES very much. In the second movement all ritard again; JB and SB use only a slight ritard, however, and those of KB and ML are almost imperceptible. All ritard at the end of the presto except JB. At the end of the final movement, ML's slowing down is slight and SB's and KB's are very slight indeed; the other flutists play heavier ritardandos here.

In his playing of the andante JR inserts a sudden slowing down (and softening) starting on the second half of the second beat of measure 92; he also does this when the sequence again repeats itself in measure 94. The effectiveness of this interesting but contrived device may be judged by the listener. ES also inserts a ritardando at the cadence in measure 112.



## ARTICULATION

Of the 282 measures that comprise Bach's Sonata in B Minor, less than 50 contain slur markings. The lack of articulation markings does not necessarily indicate that Bach preferred this music to be tongued throughout; rather, it shows that here (as in matters of tempo) there existed a common knowledge of correct interpretation of the different styles of music. The fact that little information on this subject has been passed down to us should not be a major cause of concern to twentieth century musicians; Bodky<sup>1</sup> makes this statement:

"...if we take the true affect of each piece into due consideration, we can make sound decisions about the general manner of performance, 'be it slurred, detached or what not;' it is true that we will not too often be able to come to one binding conclusion about the correct articulation of every minute detail in every piece, but we will not be wrong as long as we remain aware that 'each piece may contain a great variety of mixtures of ...pathetic, caressing, gay, splendid, or joking ideas. Therefore...one must be able to express a different affect--now sad, now gay, now serious; this is a very important tool for performance,' and--as we can add now--for proper articulation."

Clues are written into the music which guide the performer in making intelligent decisions regarding articulation. Kirnberger<sup>2</sup> tells us that the time signature and fugal form of the third movement indicate music that is "heavy and emphatic;" and the  $\frac{12}{16}$  meter of the

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<sup>1</sup>Bodky, Erwin, loc. cit., Pp. 221-222.

<sup>2</sup>Kirnberger, Johann Philip; translated by Walter Winzenburger, "Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik." Bach, The Quarterly Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, II, (January 1971), Pp. 43, 45-46.

last movement should be played with lightness--the "sixteenth notes are performed in a round and fleeting manner, without emphasis." In addition, Fenley<sup>1</sup> states that the "tempo" marking of the first movement, andante, meant that the flute part was to be played "as legato as possible."

One might theorize that whenever Bach indicates a certain articulation pattern for a motive, that pattern should be followed whenever the motive reappears whether Bach has marked the articulation or not. The truth is, however, that Bach occasionally changed the articulation for purposes of variety; compare the articulation in the flute part of measures 12 and 13 with that of the harpsichord in 96 and 97; examine also the flute part of measures 14 and 15 along with 51 and 52.

By coordinating Bach's "authentic slur material" Bodky has been able to come up with some important guidelines. Whether or not his suggestions are valid is a moot point, for none of them are followed wholeheartedly by any of the flutists under discussion! Bodky<sup>2</sup> declares, for example, "an upbeat of one note is never connected by a slur to the next note." The opening flute motive of this sonata contains no upbeat slur but all flutists have added the marking in their performances, (Example 1).

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<sup>1</sup>op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>op. cit., p. 219.

The image displays a musical score for a piece in G major and common time, comparing the original notation by Bach with seven different interpretations. The staves are labeled as follows:

- Bach**: The original notation, featuring a finger number '1' above the first measure.
- JB**: Interpretation by JB, adding slurs and accents.
- SB**: Interpretation by SB, which closely follows the original notation without the added slurs.
- KB**: Interpretation by KB, adding slurs.
- ML**: Interpretation by ML, adding slurs and accents.
- JR**: Interpretation by JR, adding slurs and accents.
- ES**: Interpretation by ES, adding slurs.

Example 1

Although the six performers add slurs throughout the first movement where Bach has indicated none, only SB does not change the markings that Bach has written in. The others all take it upon themselves to alter the composer's line, and measures 9, 12-16,

and 52 appear to be especially popular places to do this.

As for the rest of the sonata, the flutists usually take advantage of the opportunity to add their own articulation. In the last two movements, however, JB follows the music exactly, playing no slurs except those indicated by Bach himself.

In the final movement ML comes up with a different idea by using articulation to help create a rhythmic importance on a motive, (Example 2).



Example 2

While this technique may fascinate some listeners, its authenticity is highly suspect; Bodky, for one, would certainly disapprove.

## ORNAMENTATION

The controversy regarding ornamentation is the music of Bach is well known. There is no such thing as an absolute rule in this area; nevertheless, enough is known regarding interpretation practices of the time to point us toward a stylistic approach to this music.

First of all, a difference of opinion exists as to where ornamentation can occur. Fenley<sup>1</sup> gives good advice here:

"In all of the Bach flute sonatas, ornamentation should only be added where the reason for its omission was that it was self-evident..."

Of course, what was "self-evident" to the flutist of the eighteenth century is easily overlooked today. According to Emery<sup>2</sup>, cadential figurations "always require a shake of some kind." In the Sonata in B Minor these cadential passages are found in measures 26, 58, 112, and 119 of the first movement and possibly measures 91 and 124 of the last movement. (JB plays none of the shakes mentioned for the first movement; the other flutists play them all.) Other places are not so obvious, however.

Emery<sup>3</sup> states that "when a theme...is ornamented at some of its entries, but not all, one has to think of ornamenting the rest." If it can be assumed that this applies equally to passages between instruments a problem arises. Bach marks a trill in the harpsichord

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<sup>1</sup>op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>Emery, Walter, Bach's Ornaments. London: Novello and Company Limited, 1953. p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>loc. cit., p. 113.

at measure 127 of the final movement but no trill for the flute at measure 121. KB and ES play a trill anyway. It is the opinion of this writer that the function of the harpsichord trill is merely to sustain the D for two and a half measures; since the flute does not have the sustaining problem of the harpsichord Bach deemed a trill unnecessary at 121.

Because Bach used the symbol for the shake, (w), and the trill, (tr), interchangeably, (compare measure 36 of the first movement to measure 84), it is usually possible to interpret these signs at least two different ways. The context of the shake as it appears in the line can aid the performer in deciding its length. The six flutists have different ideas regarding the "context" of the shake for it appears both in its long and short forms throughout the various performances.

When the main theme of the andante reappears at measure 84 a trill is added at the end (measure 86). JB, SB, ML, and JR take the cue and add the trill in some or all of the theme's other appearances; JB and ML trill at the theme's initial statement, (Example 1). JB does not trill at the theme's every appearance, however, (e.g., measure 70).

Authorities agree that shakes should almost always start on the upper note. On the other hand, Emery<sup>1</sup> convincingly proves that there are exceptions. Although all the flutists play their shakes starting

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<sup>1</sup>Emery, Walter, "The Upper-Note Shake in Bach." The Musical Times, CXIV, (September 1973), Pp. 891, 892.

on the auxiliary, JR breaks the rule by starting on the main note in measure 86 of the first movement. He also neglects a rule of Bodky's<sup>1</sup> in this case, i.e., when the trill must start on the main note, the note "receives a value twice as long as that used in the trill." (It might be mentioned that some of SB's trills in this movement, although they begin on the upper note, lengthen that note for no apparent reason.) Both KB and JR start their trills on the main note in measure 12 of the next movement; and JR's trill, measure 124, in the last movement also sounds as though it does not start on the upper note.

Speaking of measure 12 in the largo e dolce, JB and ES start this trill before the beat. In another unorthodox move, ES breathes between the trill in measure 6 of this movement and its resolution.

Shakes can be played in a strictly measured manner and JB uses this technique. In measure 36 of the first movement, for example, he plays four thirty-second notes, (beginning with the auxiliary), for each trill.

One trill is important enough to be dealt with separately, mainly, the cadential trill at measure 79 of the andante. All flutists carefully play their trills together with their accompanists. ES's treatment is the most simple, playing a regular half-note trill. KB's is similar, although his trill seems to be faster and almost measured, (sixty-fourth notes?). Both ML and JR play trills with closing notes of about sixteenth note length; ML's closing notes

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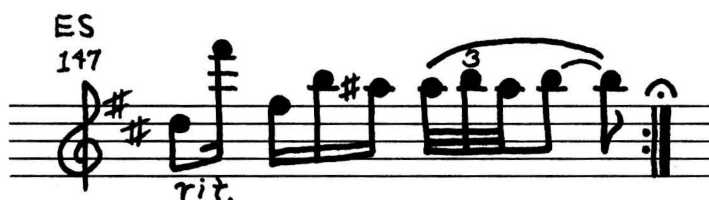
<sup>1</sup>op. cit., p. 158.

are slightly faster than JR's. JB plays a measured thirty-second note trill followed by a slow A $\sharp$ , B, A $\sharp$ ; then he and the harpsichord immediately resume their previous quick tempo. SB's interpretation is almost cadenza-like, (Example 3).



Example 3

ES plays an unusual but disputably effective ornament at the very close of the sonata, (Example 4).



Example 4

Before finishing our discussion of shakes we must return to Fenley's<sup>1</sup> statement that no ornamentation should be added where it is not written unless it is obvious. Both SB and ML use occasional, subtle shakes in the first and second movements. Although it is not "self-evident" that Bach wanted shakes in these places, it can

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<sup>1</sup>op. cit., p. 54.



hardly be said that these ornaments sound out of place.

Next to the shake, the greatest cause of concern to the novice performer of Bach must surely be the appoggiatura. A statement by Emery<sup>1</sup>, that "the length of the small note has nothing to do with the length of the appoggiatura," offers little consolation. Nevertheless, the first rising appoggiatura in the B Minor Sonata, (measure 17, first movement), probably calls for the length of a sixteenth and Fenley<sup>2</sup> gives this interpretation. JB, however, plays an eighth note appoggiatura, obviously playing it in context of the eighth notes that surround it. His idea seems to make more sense at each appearance. When the rest of the line contains mostly sixteenth notes, JB relates the appoggiatura by giving it a sixteenth note value. SB's radically different view, (playing a very fast, short trill!), has no historical foundation. As was the case with the shake, all flutists play some or all of the appoggiaturas at places where Bach has not indicated them, (measures 54, 57, 74, 75, 100, and 101).

The second movement is more problematic. Here, in addition to the rising appoggiatura, (measure 8), we have a number of falling appoggiaturas, an appoggiatura moving by skip, and written out slides. These should all be played on the beat; (SB, KB, and ES each break this rule at least once.) As for the rhythms of the various appoggiaturas,

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<sup>1</sup>Emery, Walter, Bach's Ornaments, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>op. cit., p. 53.

Emery<sup>1</sup> helps by informing us that "an appoggiatura may take as much as half the value of the main note...or even two thirds, if the main note is dotted." He evidently leans toward shorter interpretations, however, as can be seen by his advice for sight-readers:<sup>2</sup>

"...it is not a bad plan to play all appoggiaturas short-- at the very most a quarter of the main note, or a sixth if the main note is dotted. Later one should experiment with longer interpretations, giving due attention to consistency."

A key word here, and one that is ignored by many performers, is "consistency." There is no apparent reason other than tradition why beat one of measure 2 should be performed differently than beat four; and certainly measure 4 should have the same rhythm as measure 2. As long as a musician follows these guidelines his interpretation can hardly be called wrong.

The Schleifer, or slide, (measures 3 and 9), is an ornament consisting of two grace notes which proceed scalewise to a main note; it may be viewed as a double appoggiatura. The slide must be played on the beat as thirty-second notes (in this case), or faster to prevent a triplet. The appoggiatura in measure 1, then, would theoretically take the same value as the slide. Only ML disagrees with this interpretation by playing a sixteenth appoggiatura in measure 1 and sixty-fourths in measure 3.

The even thirty-second note interpretation of either beat one or four in measures 2, 4, or 8 is most likely invalid. Unfortunately, JB, KB, ML, and JR are unfamiliar with performance practice here.

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<sup>1</sup>Emery, Walter, Bach's Ornaments. p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>loc. cit., Pp. 79, 80.

In measure 10 the context of the rest of the measure suggests a thirty-second note interpretation of the appoggiatura moving by skip. All agree.

Measure 16's appoggiatura might correctly be interpreted as a sixteenth, an eighth, or even a quarter, though the latter should probably be reserved for the second time through. The recorded flutists favor the eighth note value.

The presto is relatively problem-free after examining the largo e dolce. Here the only written ornamentation is the slide (measure 7). Although it should also be played at measure 40, KB leaves it out. ML plays the slide also in measures 58 and 72, when the harpsichord has the theme, and also in measures 15 and 40 since he has the jump of a fourth in those measures also.

The slide must be played on the beat and parallel octaves would result if it were not. The rhythms of the slide are either played like a triplet on beat two (JB and ML) or faster.

Before dealing with the appoggiaturas in the final movement it would be well to refer to a couple of statements of Emery:<sup>1</sup>

"An appoggiatura on a tied note may take the whole value of the note."

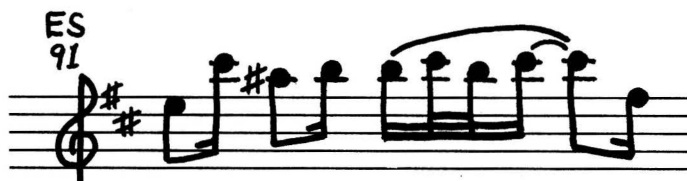
"When the main note is followed by a rest, the appoggiatura may take the whole value of the main note."

The second rule is reinforced by the fact that the descending appoggiatura in measure 101 would create parallel fifths with the bass if played as a sixteenth; it should be played as an eighth. All the

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<sup>1</sup>Emery, Walter, Bach's Ornaments. Pp. 84, 88.

other appoggiaturas are ascending and therefore unrelated; the dotted eighth interpretation is the most logical although KB plays the eighth while the others play sixteenths. SB plays the appoggiatura in measure 101 as a sixteenth note but interprets the appoggiatura in 91 as a short, fast trill (as he did in the first movement). ES follows her rising appoggiaturas with mordents, (Example 5); this is consistent with her last measure mentioned earlier, (Example 4); it is hard to agree that it is actually what Bach would have wanted, though.



Example 5

As before, the flutists add the appoggiatura before the first note in measure 111 where the composer has neglected to indicate it.

## OTHER COMMENTS

There are, of course, other aspects of the performances that deserve attention besides tempo, articulation, and ornamentation. A couple of the most unique will be mentioned briefly.

ML's highly personal interpretation of the second movement is based on the French overture style. He double-dots notes, dots every other note in series of even thirty-seconds, and changes other rhythms as drastically. His playing of measure 16 is typical, (Example 6).



Example 6

In the first movement SB appears to be dissatisfied with Bach's "lack of ingenuity" as far as rhythmic variety is concerned. He re-writes measures 109 and 110, (Example 7).



Example 7

An evaluation of the interpretations of the harpsichordists in these recordings would be even more lengthy than the present study. Each member of each duo is influenced by the other but more problems need to be examined by the keyboard artist.

It is hoped that this study will encourage musicians to give careful thought and preparation in order to arrive at an accurate interpretation for performance of this music. The indestructability of Bach's music allows it to survive; validity and sensitivity will allow it to live.