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Bach's Slurs: Abandoned by the Editors

The third movement (*Andante*) from J.S. Bach's (1685-1750) *Sonata in G Major for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord, BWV 1027* has been a source of controversy among a handful of editors for decades. Many editions of the sonata have been published, all disregarding the unusual, uneven slurs shown in Bach's own manuscript. This study compares and analyzes some of the most promising editions, some for modern viola, along with written opinions of their scholars. It also compares BWV 1027 to BWV 1039 – an earlier trio sonata for two flutes and continuo that uses the same music as BWV 1027, including the uneven slurs in the *Andante*. Editors choose more regular, predictable two- or four-note slurs likely because the slurs in the manuscript could be careless mistakes and because even slurs are more straightforward to the modern player. Even though most editors follow the manuscript, some more closely than others, it is evident that they all prefer to err on the side of caution and ignore Bach's adventurous slurs.

Although Bach's slurs in the viola da gamba part of BWV 1027's *Andante* appear to be imprecise, there is reason to believe they could be accurate because of their presence in BWV 1039, yet editors often "correct" the "mistakes" in Bach's manuscript because of their skepticism.<sup>1</sup> Choosing to provide a facsimile, as Lucy Robinson did in her Faber edition, is an excellent solution because it allowed her to make editorial

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach. "Sonata G-Dur für zwei Flauti traversi und Continuo," BWV 1039, Mus. ms. Bach St 431, n.d. (ca. 1726), Die Bach-Handschriften, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.

decisions without steering players away from their own interpretation of Bach's holograph.<sup>2</sup>

The manuscript of BWV 1027 is kept at the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> Unlike many of Bach's works, it is his own holograph and not in the hand of a copyist. The manuscript was written circa 1740.<sup>4</sup>

#### Part One: Bach versus *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*

Bärenreiter's *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke* Ser. 6 vol. 4 includes BWV 1027's *Andante* in two forms.<sup>5</sup> A facsimile of Bach's manuscript is included at the beginning of the volume. The viola da gamba manuscript is relatively legible, however in several places Bach wrote slurs that are unclear in their intent. For example, in measure four, Bach appears to have written four sixteenth notes with a slur between the second and third notes. The same slur appears again in measures ten and eleven. In measure twelve Bach seems to have written four sixteenth notes with the third and fourth notes slurred. Parallel measures (i.e. measures containing similar material) sometimes have mismatched slurs – something fairly unusual in Bach's writing. For example, measures four and ten have identical first two beats, yet their slurs do not match. Another example can be found between measures six and twelve.

Although the slurs seem unusual, there is reason to believe they are correct – they are in Bach's hand, after all. Yet later in the same volume of the *Neue Ausgabe*

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<sup>2</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sonatas: BWV 1027-1029 for Viola da Gamba (Violoncello) and Harpsichord*, ed. by Lucy Robinson (London: Faber Music Limited, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Cembalo*, ed. Hans Eppstein. *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, ser. 6 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Robinson, "Notes on Editing the Bach Gamba Sonatas (BWV 1027-1029)," *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society* 14 (1985): 25-29.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Cembalo*, ed. Hans Eppstein. *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, ser. 6 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1984).

*Sämtlicher Werke*, Hans Eppstein includes his version of BWV 1027, where he appears to have ignored Bach's holograph.

In measures four, ten, and eleven of his version, Eppstein provides two options for slurs – one option is printed with dotted lines, indicating it is an editorial suggestion, and the other option is printed normally, indicating it is what appears in the manuscript. Interestingly, neither option reflects Bach's holograph in these three measures. In measure four, all four sixteenth notes on beat three are slurred, and Eppstein suggests slurring two-plus-two. In measures ten and eleven, Eppstein provides the same two options. In measure twelve, Eppstein adds a slur to the first two sixteenth notes of beat two, effectively making it parallel with measure six. In the critical commentary for BWV 1027 in the *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, Eppstein acknowledges the inconsistent slurs, arguing they are mistakes not to be taken seriously by players.<sup>6</sup> Eppstein also wrote a separate article about BWV 1027 and BWV 1039, focused on the origins of both works, but it does not address the issue of slurs in the third movement.<sup>7</sup>

Eppstein's added slur in measure twelve is a reasonable suggestion from a player's point of view, because it allows the bowing to work out more easily (meaning the movement ends on a down bow without any extra adjustments). It is most likely an example of Eppstein "correcting" the manuscript under the assumption that Bach intended for measures six and twelve (beats one and two) to be identical. It is possible he is correct, but perhaps Bach decided to write them differently for variety. In addition, this

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<sup>6</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach and Hans Eppstein, *Drei Sonaten Für Viola Da Gamba Und Cembalo: BWV 1027-1029*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Hans Eppstein, "J. S. Bachs Triosonate G-dur (BWV 1039) Und Ihre Beziehungen Zur Sonate Für Gambe Und Cembalo G-dur (BWV 1027)," *Die Musikforschung* 18, no. 2 (April 1965): 126-137.

version's place in the *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke* makes Eppstein's adjustments a little harder to accept – one would think it would be a direct reflection of the manuscript.

The manuscript for the two-flute version, BWV 1039 (c. 1726), was owned by Bach, but is unfortunately not in his hand – it was made by two unknown copyists.<sup>8</sup> Although Bach did not write it down himself, the copyists were very precise in their markings. Their clearly printed manuscript leaves little to question, including the unexpected slurs.

The *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke* Ser. 6, vol. 3 does not contain a facsimile of BWV 1039, however its version of the trio sonata edited by Hans-Peter Schmitz provides an interesting perspective on Bach's slurs.<sup>9</sup> The slurs in BWV 1039 are vastly different than those in BWV 1027, pointing out the differences between the two main motives. The two-plus-two slur pattern that dominates BWV 1027 is used in the rising motive shown first at the beginning of the piece. The following motive, a more stagnant figure, is slurred three-plus-one.

In BWV 1039, parallel figures have mismatched slurs in the same places as BWV 1027, although the slurs between the two pieces do not match. Measures four and ten, as well as six and twelve, have parallel material with mismatched slurs. The inclusion of uneven slurs and mismatched parallel figures in BWV 1039 is a clue that those in BWV 1027's manuscript are intentional and should be included in contemporary editions.

## Part Two: The Editors

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<sup>8</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach. "Sonata G-Dur für zwei Flauti traversi und Continuo," BWV 1039, Mus. ms. Bach St 431, n.d. (ca. 1726), Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.

<sup>9</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Werke für Flöte*, ed. Hans-Peter Schmitz. *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, ser. 6 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963).

In the past several decades, many editions of BWV 1027 have appeared, some for viola da gamba and some for modern viola or cello. They all contain BWV 1028 and BWV 1029 – Bach’s other two viola da gamba sonatas – as well. Each edition varies in its amount of editing, ranging from some with copious adjustments to others that leave Bach’s holograph relatively untouched. Most, however, seem to ignore those controversial slurs.

Hans Eppstein later published a Bärenreiter Urtext edition of BWV 1027 with parts for viola da gamba and modern viola.<sup>10</sup> Amidst other viola editions with copious editorial adjustments, Bärenreiter is preferable for violists aiming for a more historically accurate performance. The edition as a whole is minimally edited, however the slurs Eppstein chooses in the *Andante* match those he printed in *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*. Eppstein’s preface of the edition does not include much information on his methods for editing those slurs aside from explaining his use of dotted lines. Again, as evident in his *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke* version of BWV 1027, it is clear that Eppstein views Bach’s slurs as unintentional markings since neither his printed “original” slurs nor his dotted editorial ones match the manuscript.

In Yuki Konii’s review of Eppstein’s Bärenreiter edition, Konii provides some more information behind Eppstein’s editorial decisions:

He rejects the possible slurring at some points of just the first (or last) three semiquavers in a group of four, although Bach seems to have intended this grouping occasionally in the earlier version of this sonata for two flutes and continuo, BWV 1039.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba (Viola) und Cembalo*, ed. Hans Eppstein (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Yuki Konii, Review of *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke, VI/iv: Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Cembalo, BWV 1027-1029*, by Johann Sebastian Bach and Hans Eppstein, *Music & Letters* 68, no. 1 (January 1987): 83.

Konii also states that Eppstein viewed the *Andante* slurs as “conflicting and imprecise markings,” making it very clear why he chose to change them.<sup>12</sup> It is a little strange, however, that the three-plus-one slur pattern occurs so often in BWV 1039 yet Eppstein refused to consider using it in his edition of BWV 1027.

Lucy Robinson created a Faber edition for viola da gamba or modern cello.<sup>13</sup> Her edition is similar to Eppstein’s in that the parts themselves are minimally edited, however her bowing choices in the *Andante* are more like the manuscript than Eppstein’s. In measure four, Robinson chose a three-plus-one bowing. Measures ten and eleven also feature the three-plus-one bowing. Measure four and measure ten both feature the three-plus-one bowing, however measure four only has it on beat one while measure ten uses the bowing on both beats one and two, maintaining Bach’s mismatched slurs for parallel sections. Robinson did add an extra slur to measure twelve, as Eppstein did, making it parallel to measure six.

Robinson’s edition includes a lengthy preface describing in detail the elements and evidence that went into her editorial decisions. She also decided to include a facsimile of the *Andante* manuscript in her edition. The amount of information in the preface along with the facsimile allows players to inform themselves of the issues surrounding the *Andante* slurs and make their own decisions. In an article in the *Journal of the American Viola da Gamba Society*, Robinson stated, “I think that the player should also be provided with a facsimile so that he can make up his own mind.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Konii, Review of *Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke, VI/iv*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sonatas: BWV 1027-1029 for Viola da Gamba (Violoncello) and Harpsichord*, ed. by Lucy Robinson (London: Faber Music Limited, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Robinson, “Notes on Editing the Bach Gamba Sonatas (BWV 1027-1029),” *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society* 14 (1985): 25-29.

In his review of Robinson's Faber edition, Gordon Sandford praised Robinson for creating an edition that he believes is the best because it "clearly identifies editorial decisions, and presents the music in a format easy to play from."<sup>15</sup> He also stated, "Robinson is careful to avoid arbitrary decisions; rather, she presents the arguments and permits the performer to decide, aided by four facsimiles."<sup>16</sup> According to Sandford, Robinson successfully created an edition that caters to all – it is easy to play from and provides more background information for those who wish to consult it. If Robinson's edition contained a part for modern viola, it could be the preferred edition among gambists, cellists, and violists alike.

Perhaps a solution for players wishing to adhere to Bach's own *Andante* slurs is to not use an edited version at all. Hille Perl published a facsimile edition of Bach's viola da gamba sonatas, containing nothing but facsimiles of Bach's manuscripts and a preface describing them. In her preface, Perl states:

In [the facsimile's] apparent inconsistency or arbitrariness, particularly as far as the application of slurs is concerned, they in fact provide a wonderful opportunity to consider and experience the well-known material in terms of new possibilities of articulation and interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

The facsimiles are beautifully printed in color. Paul Moran, in his review of Perl's edition, believed that "because the sources are perfectly legible, it would be possible, as Perl suggests in her preface, to play from this facsimile."<sup>18</sup> By using a facsimile instead

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon Sandford, Review of *Sonatas, BWV 1027-1029; for Viola da Gamba (Violoncello) and Obligato Harpsichord*, by Johann Sebastian Bach, Lucy Robinson, and John Butt, *Notes* 45, no. 2 (December 1988): 384.

<sup>16</sup> Sandford, Review of *Sonatas, BWV 1027-1029*, 383.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und obligates Cembalo (BWV 1027-1029): Faksimile*, ed. by Hille Perl (Magdeburg: Walhall, 2014), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Moran, "Drei Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Obligates Cembalo, BWV 1027-1029," *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 48 (2013): 73.

of an edited version, players would be able to make their own decisions about Bach's slurs without being swayed by an editor to adjust them a certain way.

The discrepancies in Bach's *Andante* slurs will likely never be fully resolved – without Bach alive to explain his markings, editors will continue to grapple with them. Although Bach's markings are somewhat imprecise, the presence of uneven slurs in the earlier *Andante* of BWV 1039 suggest they are indeed what Bach intended. Players today wishing to adhere to Bach's markings should think carefully about which edition they choose and consult facsimiles before making personal decisions about bowings, slurs, and articulations. In addition, editors should consider including facsimiles in their own editions, as Robinson did, or suggesting in their prefaces that players consult one. As a result, Bach's slurs may finally see the light of day.

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