

Performance Practice Review

Volume 5
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 5

1992

"Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach." By John Butt

Kimberly Marshall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marshall, Kimberly (1992) ""Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach." By John Butt," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 5: No. 2, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199205.02.05
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol5/iss2/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Reviews of Books

John Butt. *Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J.S. Bach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

As indicated on the cover jacket, "this is the first comprehensive assessment of J.S. Bach's use of articulation marks (i.e. slurs and dots) in the large body of primary sources." There exist numerous studies of articulation in Bach's music, but most of these have relied on the markings published in collected editions; the few that have been based on the evidence of primary sources have been limited in scope or purpose, such as J. R. Fuchs's monograph on the keyboard works.¹ Despite his painstaking attention to the context of markings in the keyboard scores, Fuchs was not able to discern the criteria that determined Bach's choice of one articulation possibility over another. He summons others to provide a classification of articulation throughout Bach's instrumental music, hopeful that this might shed light on individual performance media.

Fuchs's call could not have received a more thorough or compelling answer than that provided by John Butt. By assessing the role of articulation markings within Bach's compositional process and comparing this to specific instances in an impressive number of Bach manuscripts and early prints, Butt is able to explain perplexing variations and discrepancies. Previous writers have established that some of these problems result from the different amounts of time spent on preparing individual sources and the varying contexts in which the music was

¹Josef Rainerius Fuchs, *Studien zu Artikulationsangaben in Orgel- und Clavierwerken von Joh. Seb. Bach* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler Verlag, 1985).

copied or published.² Butt's main contribution is his evidence that differences in the way Bach notated the articulation of similar figures may also relate to the technical requirements of various instruments or to the evolution of a thematic idea during the course of a movement. Far from deeming Bach's choice of articulation to be inconsistent, incomplete, and inaccurate, Butt assigns great significance to autograph markings in the sources and shows that they accentuate important rhythmic qualities of the music. He concludes that "the notated articulation is perhaps the closest evidence we have of how Bach himself interpreted his own music." (p. 207)

Although the intricacy of Butt's documentation and analysis may be overly abundant for some readers, the book is clearly organized to serve as a reference work, with information about specific pieces readily available. Appendix 1 lists the manuscript and printed sources consulted by the author and Appendix 2 intabulates the regular slur patterns found in the concerted vocal works, using a clever system of abbreviations and symbols to provide more information per page than the *OED*. Although this compact format requires the reader to refer frequently to a rather lengthy key, these efforts are rewarded by the author's diligence in assembling such a vast quantity of useful data. Butt includes more discussion of the principal articulation patterns in Chapter 7, where each slurring is classified according to its metrical pulse, figuration, tessitura, and instrumentation. It is hard to imagine a more successful ordering of the material, and the author is to be congratulated on his sharp eyes—noticing slurs even in deleted sketch material—and exhaustive classification, marred only by the erroneous reversal of patterns 1D and 1E in the typesetting on pp. 96-7. Casual readers will appreciate the succinct summaries closing certain chapters, as well as the table of BWV works cited, a reference tool that would have greatly facilitated the use of another publication by Cambridge University Press, Peter Williams's three-volume study of Bach's organ music.

Butt's concise organization of this weighty material enables him to carry the listener on a fascinating voyage through many uncharted waters of Bach notation. The book opens with a general discussion of baroque articulation that focuses on singing styles and text underlay. Butt

²Studies by Davidson and Dürr have already addressed these issues. See Georg von Dadelsen, "Die Crux der Nebensache. Editorische und praktische Bemerkungen zu Bachs Artikulation," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 64 (1978): 95-112; and Alfred Dürr, "De vita cum imperfectis," *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Music in Honor of Arthur Mendel*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1974): 243-53.

emphasizes the importance of vocal music in Bach's time: "singing was very much at the center of musical thought since it was an essential part of both education and worship in orthodox Lutheranism." (p. 9) Having established the centrality of singing, he then describes the performing styles advocated in contemporary singing treatises, the articulation appropriate to specific *figurae*, and the use of slurs in defining the musical distribution of a text. As would be expected, singing provides a model for contemporary instrumental music, especially string playing, where articulation also has both a technical function, indicating changes of the bow, as well as an interpretive role. Perhaps because of this dual purpose, articulation markings are more prevalent in string writing than in wind or keyboard music. By evaluating the meaning of articulation for each of these diverse media, Butt is able to demonstrate that the implication of slurs is very similar, "although the technical means to their realization vary." (p. 58)

This insight into the function of slurs in different media enables the author to explain apparent inconsistencies in the notation of articulation: different signs may be required to produce similar musical effects from different instrumental media. The *Sonata in G major for viola da gamba and obbligato harpsichord*, BWV 1027, is notorious for the many discrepancies in the articulation specified for the two instruments. This is evident in the conspicuous opening figure of the Allegro ma non tanto, which is slurred in pairs by the gamba and in groups of four by the harpsichord. By considering the implication of slurring on the sound production in each case, Butt concludes that the four-note slurs sustain the sound of the harpsichord, while two-note slurs serve the same function on the gamba, encouraging the player to make full, fast bowstrokes. Thus, although the markings are different, their musical effect is similar.

The importance of articulation on sound production is illustrated in another example of "inconsistent" articulation. In BWV 211/8, continuo slurs are found only in the *piano* sections when it accompanies the voice, although the upper parts contain similar figuration without slurs. Since slurred passages in string parts are to be played on the same bowstroke, without the fuller tone and accentuation resulting from frequent changes of bow, Butt conjectures that Bach intended the slurring to create "a softer sound for the background continuo accompaniment." (p. 99) He also points out the relationship between dynamics, bowing, and slurring in the Bourrée of BWV 1006, where "a repeated echo (with identical slurring) begins with the 'weaker' up-bow." (bars 9-12, p. 188) This bowing reinforces Bach's *piano* marking for the repeat. Since slurring is

so closely linked with bowing in string music, it plays a vital part in delineating phrase structure.

Just as articulation is directly related to techniques of instrumental and vocal performance—indications of bowing and text underlay—so it may reveal important aspects of Bach's music. Butt demonstrates that slurring was a vital component in the composition of the *Decoratio*, the smallest note values of a piece comprising figures which embellish the basic melodic framework. In an unfinished sketch for the chorale prelude, "O Trauerigkeit, O Herzeleid" from the *Orgelbüchlein*, Bach originally notated the chorale in half notes in the top voice. He later ornamented this simple melody with inserted dotted quarters and eighths, adding slurs to unite the notes of each half-note group. Other similar examples allow Butt to conclude that "Bach thus notates the *Decoratio* at the outset of the compositional process, automatically associating slurs with a dynamic solo line." (p. 69) By considering the projection of melody in performance, the author is able to demonstrate that Bach's articulation was calculated to enhance the sophisticated phrase structure of his music.

The unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas, BWV 1001-6, contain some of the most intricately articulated of Bach's music, providing numerous contexts in which to observe the effects of notation. Slurs can modify the hierarchical accents within a bar or they may signal structural features such as sequential groupings or the introduction of a new figure. In his analysis of the Presto in BWV 1001, Butt convincingly demonstrates how slurring contributes to the successful dovetailing of two sequences in bar 12 and adds emphasis to the harmonic sequence that follows. Another excellent analysis reveals how Bach's "inconsistent" slurring of the *suspirans* figure relates to the phrase structure and the seamless overlapping of sequences in the concerto BWV 1041. "Just as Bach seldom uses the same figure incessantly in a continuous movement . . . the slurring is not blindly regular; it reflects some of the underlying subtleties of the music itself." (p. 199) And why should it be otherwise? When reading Butt's ingenious explanations for the variety of autograph markings encountered, one cannot help but wonder why anyone ever expected regular, predictable articulation in an oeuvre that is so exceptional in every other aspect!

Thanks to the author's skill at classifying and decoding Bach's articulation markings, *Bach Interpretation* lives up to its ambitious title, bringing us closer to the composer's own interpretation of his music as encoded in a sometimes enigmatic system of dots and slurs.

Kimberly Marshall