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Citation

Wolff, Christoph. 2014. The Bach Canon at Harvard and its dedicatee: a riddle finally solved. Harvard Library Bulletin 24 (3): 104-109.

Permanent link

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The Bach Canon at Harvard and Its Dedicatee: A Riddle Finally Solved

Christoph Wolff

HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S HOUGHTON LIBRARY HOLDS ONE OF THE VERY few autograph music manuscripts dated by Johann Sebastian Bach (see figure 5.1). It represents the sole source of the canon for four voices (BWV 1073) composed when Bach served from 1708 to 1717 as organist, chamber musician, and later also as concertmaster at the ducal court of Saxe-Weimar. The single manuscript leaf belongs to the Locker-Lampson-Warburg-Grimson Album with the shelf mark BMS Eng 870 (35b).¹

The little musical composition is a canon of the kind frequently found in friendship albums of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. An *album amicorum* (in German, *Stammbuch*) typically contains entries made by friends, relatives, and acquaintances of its owner and includes proverbs, verses, drawings, best wishes, and the like. Musicians favored canons as entries for this purpose, especially since their abbreviated notation made it possible to fit a complete piece of polyphonic music on a single page in octavo or even smaller formats.

That Bach wrote his *Canon à 4. Voc: perpetuus* as a riddle piece for such an album is indicated by the standard dedicatory phrase he added to the date (Weimar, den 2. Aug: 1713) at the bottom of the page:

Dieses wenige wolte dem Herrn
Besizer zu geneigtem An-
gedencken hier einzeichnen
Joh: Seb: Bach.
Fürstlich Sächsischer HoffOrg. v.
Cammer Musicus.

(To contribute this little piece here to the Herr Owner [of the book] in the hope of friendly remembrance is the wish of Joh. Seb. Bach, Princely Saxon Court Organist and Chamber Musician.)

¹ Barbara M. Wolff, *Music Manuscripts at Harvard: A Catalogue of Music Manuscripts from the 14th to the 20th Centuries in the Houghton Library and the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Library, 1992), 15.



Figure 5.1. J. S. Bach, album entry with canon BWV 1073 (single leaf), Houghton Library, bMSEng 870 (35b).
Reproduced at actual size.

The single leaf on which the canon is notated measures 8.5 x 14 cm and was obviously removed at some point from an unknown friendship book whose original owner was not named by Bach. Therefore, the true, if unintended, riddle of the piece composed as a genuine riddle canon consists in the identification of its dedicatee, the mysterious “Herr Owner” of the album. Curiously, the enigmatic notation of the riddle canon never presented a problem, as clefs and entry marks for the canonic voices were provided by Bach. Hence, the correct contrapuntal solution was published in 1886 by Paul von Walderssee² on the basis of the first publication of the unresolved canon in volume I of Philipp Spitta’s Bach biography of 1873,³ ten years after the single-leaf manuscript had shown up on the antiquarian market in 1863.

Spitta proposed that Bach might have written the canon for his colleague, friend, and distant cousin, the Weimar town organist Johann Gottfried Walther—a hypothesis

2 “Versuch zur Lösung eines J. S. Bach’schen Räthselkanons,” *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 2 (1886): 357–363.

3 Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1873), 1:386 and following.

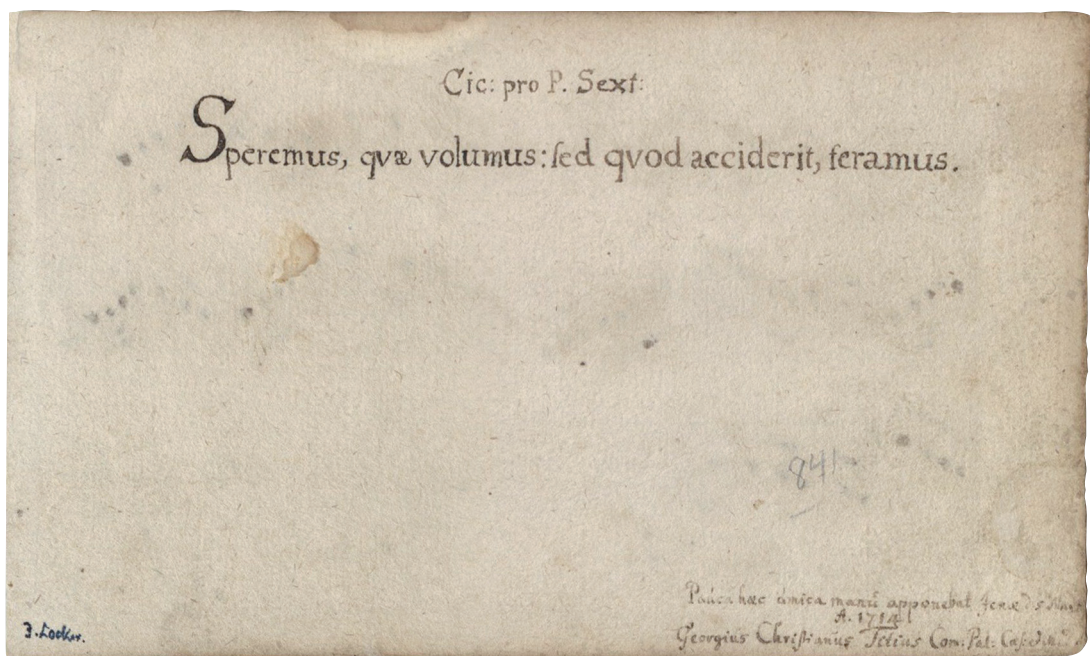


Figure 5.2. J. G. Titius, album entry with Cicero quote (overleaf of figure 5.1).
Reproduced at actual size.

for a long time widely accepted by Bach scholars until Hans-Joachim Schulze⁴ voiced serious skepticism in 1967 and suggested considering as a more likely candidate one of Bach's Weimar pupils like, for example, Philipp David Kräuter. Searching for more concrete and reliable evidence when preparing the edition of Bach's canons for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (NBA),⁵ I myself examined in the early 1970s the autograph of BWV 1073 now at Harvard and apparently happened to be the first one to pay attention to the verso side of the canon leaf not mentioned by Spitta nor described anywhere else.⁶ The back shows another album entry by a certain Georg Christian Titius, dated Jena, June 5, 1714 (see figure 5.2), which includes a quotation from Cicero ("Speremus, quæ volumus: sed quod acciderit, feramus") followed by the Latin dedication "Pauca hæc amica manu apponebat" (this little entry was added by a friendly hand). But here, too, the dedicatee remains unidentified and the name of the contributor, the physician

4 "Johann Sebastian Bachs Kanonwidmungen," *Bach-Jahrbuch* (1967): 83 and following.

5 Series VIII/volume 1 (Kassel and Leipzig, 1976).

6 Christoph Wolff, *Kritischer Bericht*, NBA VIII/1 (1976), 15 and following and 32.



Figure 5.3. J. S. Drese, Gebhard album entry with canon “Ora et labora”, Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek. Reproduced at actual size.

Dr. Georg Christian Tietz (Titius) of Jena, 1682–1720, also provided no helpful clues. Therefore, I had no choice but to leave the identification open.

A lucky recent discovery made by Michael Maul, a former doctoral student of mine and research associate at the Leipzig Bach Archive, finally produced the definitive solution to the riddle.⁷ As part of the Bach Archive project (begun in 2002) to search systematically in archives and libraries in central Germany for Bach-family related materials, Maul came across a most interesting friendship album in the extensive collection of historical *Stammbücher* at the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar. The book with the shelf mark Stb 456 contains various entries by Weimar personalities and colleagues of Bach, among them the cantor Georg Theodor Reineccius, the court capellmeister Johann Samuel Drese (see figure 5.3), the vice capellmeister

⁷ The following paragraphs summarize for the most part Maul’s research published in his article “Ein Weimarer Stammbuch und Bachs Kanon BWV 1073,” in *Übertönte Geschichten: Musikkultur in Weimar*, ed. Hellmut T. Seemann and Thorsten Valk (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), 221–233. I want to express my thanks to Dr. Michael Maul (Bach-Archiv Leipzig) for making available the digital scans for figures 5.3 and 5.4 and to the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar for permission to reproduce them.

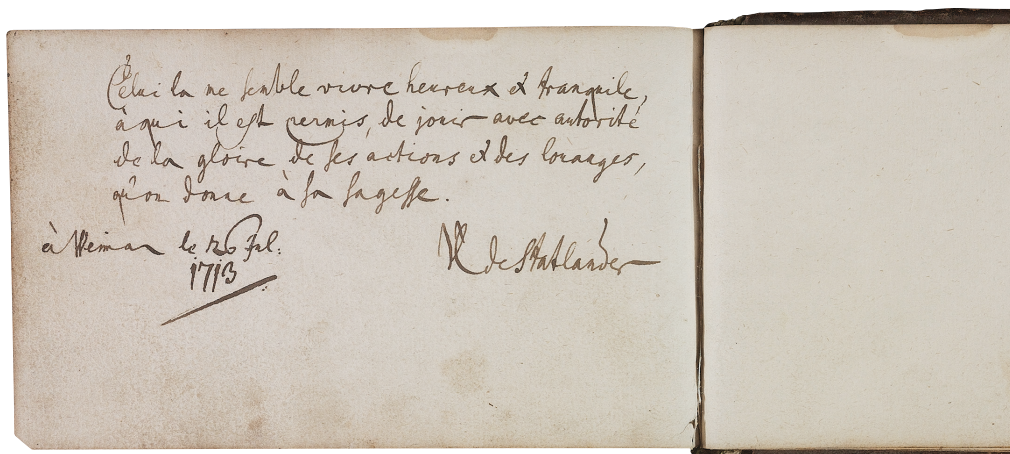


Figure 5.4. Gebhard album, facing pages (fols. [133v-134r]), Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek. Reproduced at sixty percent of original size.

Johann Wilhelm Drese, the court librarian and cantata librettist Salomon Franck, and the conrector of the Weimar gymnasium and later rector of the St. Thomas School in Leipzig, Johann Matthias Gesner.

The original owner of the album to whom all entries are dedicated is Johann Christoph Gebhard (1654–1723), imperial notary public and from 1690 until his death the town scribe of Weimar. An active musician on the side, he regularly also served as a member-at-large of the ducal court capelle, a fact that explains the unusually

prominent representation of Weimar musicians in the album. Johann Sebastian Bach would fit well into this company, but no entry by him is included. However, closer examination of the book shows that a few leaves were cut out, with their stumps still visible. The Houghton Library leaf with Bach's canon, in the exact same format as all the album's pages, fits perfectly the tiny paper stump now between fols. [133] and [134]. Moreover, a narrow brownish stain of about 2 cm length on the upper edge of the paper on fols. [133–134] (see figure 5.4) matches exactly the same stain on the Houghton autograph leaf. This physical evidence links the Houghton leaf to Gebhard's album and is proof of the leaf's origin. Incidentally, the location of the stain, as well as the rough fore-edge soiled by frequent handling (contrasting with the smooth and clean edge cut at the inner margin), proves that Bach actually notated his canon on the verso side of the oblong leaf and that the Titius entry, dated nearly a year later, was made on the recto side.

Michael Maul has been able to solve the riddle of the canon's dedicatee, the Weimar town scribe and fellow musician Johann Gottlieb Gebhard. En passant we also learn that Bach's immediate superior, the court capellmeister Drese, who made his entry a month later, in September 1713, must have seen Bach's unusually long, complex, and challenging canon. Nevertheless, he dared composing an extremely short, simple, and indeed embarrassingly naive four-part canon—all the more embarrassing with the text underlay "Ora et labora" and further evidence of the artistic asymmetries that existed in the Weimar court capelle to Bach's disadvantage.

The Gebhard Album was acquired by the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in the late 1850s or early 1860s, more than a century and a quarter after the original owner's death. It apparently came from an unknown source, a private person or a dealer—perhaps the one who noticed the leaf with the entry in the famous composer's hand, was intrigued by its particular value, and removed it from the book. The leaf with the Bach canon hit the antiquarian market by 1863, was immediately acquired by the collector Gustav Moritz Clauss, subsequently by Hermann Schulz (1872), Frederick Locker-Lampson (1895), and finally ended up in the Locker-Lampson-Grimson-Album given to Houghton Library by Bettina W. Grimson in 1960.

Contributors

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