

***Quaerendo invenietis* in J.S. Bach's Musical Offering BWV 1079**

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As is commonly known, the origin of J.S. Bach's composition, entitled *Musical Offering*, was associated with his visit to Potsdam, where he demonstrated his art of improvisation before His Majesty, the Prussian King Frederick II and his court on Sunday, 5 May 1747. Bach improvised a fugue on the theme suggested by the monarch, as commanded, and promised to compose the "right fugue on paper" (*ordentliche Fuge zu Papier*), on his return to Leipzig.

Bach fulfilled (and even exceeded) the promise he made to the king. He wrote the monothematic cycle consisting of thirteen pieces. It included two fugues (Bach named them *ricercars*), a sonata for flute, violin and continuo, and ten canons.

The composition of the *Musical Offering* has always raised many debates. Today, the most popular conviction among scholars is that the engraver (it has been suggested that Johann Georg Schübler managed the process of the engraving), for reasons of economy, placed some of the canons where he could find a free space—and not in the order set out by the author, thus distorting the composer's concept of the whole. For this reason, many have attempted to suggest their own versions of reconstruction of Bach's original idea. There are about two dozen such versions today.¹

Fulfilling his promise to glorify the king's theme, Bach permeated his composition with various inscriptions containing concepts of *theme* (Thema, Soggetto, Cantio) and *King* (Rex, Reale). One inscription, however, was outstanding: above the two-voice canon that followed the six-voice *ricercar*, it read *Canon a 2. Quaerendo invenietis*. As we can see, this does not contain the "required" words that refer to *theme* or *King*, and its function is not quite clear. Thus, the inscription became the subject of various interpretations. The only thing that does unite the scholars is that this is a quotation from the Bible. Christoph Wolff, for example, writes: "Mit Ausnahme des Bibelzitates '*Quaerendo invenietis*' aus Matthäus 7.7 (Vulgata)...."²

However opening Matthew 7: 7, we see the following:

Petite, et dabitur vobis: quaerite, et invenietis: pulsate, et aperietur vobis ("Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.")

There is an obvious difference. Bach's inscription says *Quaerendo invenietis*, while in Matthew we find *quaerite, et invenietis*. This means that Bach's words are not a quotation, as scholars, from Spitta on, have claimed.³ They can be an altered biblical expression, or Bach's own text as a variation on Matthew and Luke. Bach's education, after graduating from the elite Lateinschule (where Martin Luther had studied earlier), suggests that he had a good knowledge of the Bible. His personal copy of the Calov Bible shows that he continued to insert marginalia

1 The first eleven versions have been analyzed in Wilhelm Pfannkuch, "J.S. Bachs 'Musikalisches Opfer': Bemerkungen zu den bisherigen Untersuchungen und Neuordnungsversuchen." In *Die Musikforschung* 7. Jahrg., H. 4 (1954): 440-53.

2 "With the exclusion of the quotation from the Bible *Quaerendo invenietis* (Matthew 7:7, Vulgata)." See *Johann Sebastian Bach...Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*. Serie VIII, Band 1. Kritischer Bericht von Christoph Wolff. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1976), 106.

3 Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach. His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685–1750*, Vol. 3. Translated from the German by Clara Bell & J.A.Fuller-Maitland (London, 1885), 195.

even in the last years of his life. What could have prevented him from making a direct quotation from this text instead of using his own imitation?

To address this question, we need to return to Matthew 7:7 (as well as Luke 11:9).

Considering Cultural Context

First, both the Vulgate and all its translations have this expression in the *imperative*. This is a circumstance rarely bestowed with special significance or, indeed, any significance at all. As a result, there are various misunderstandings regarding court etiquette or the general cultural context of Bach's epoch. Here, for example, Hans Theodor David's description of one of the moments during the famous episode of Bach's improvisation for Frederick II, at the very same moment when the king offered Bach his theme for improvisation: "Bach, though, was not satisfied. He had declined to improvise a six-voice fugue on the King's theme..."⁴

Let us consider the situation when the king commands Bach to improvise a fugue on his theme, but Bach allows himself to object and to decline this command. Some descriptions go as far as to say that Bach lectured the King, saying that not every theme was good for the six-voice fugue, hence he would improvise only a three-voice fugue. Moreover, the episode unfolds in the presence of courtiers, themselves quite knowledgeable about music. As appropriate to the situation, there were also members of the royal family and a fair constellation of renowned musicians who constituted the king's chapel. Obviously, Bach's style of behavior with the king, as described in this Apocrypha, was unacceptable.

Similarly, Bach could not allow himself to address the king in the imperative, as in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: "Seek and ye shall find."

Secondly, on thinking over the situation and its association with this phrase in the gospel, it is important to remember who is doing the addressing and who is being addressed. As follows from the gospel, this is one of Jesus's phrases, preaching before his people and his disciples. Could Bach, addressing the king with these words, place himself in the position of Jesus and reduce the king to the rank of the disciple? Hardly.

Bach himself, in his dedication to Frederick II presents this situation in very different light:

Your Majesty's Self deigned to play to me a fugue-subject upon the clavier, and most graciously charged me thereupon to carry it out in your Majesty's august Presence. Your Majesty's command was my most humble duty.⁵

In light of the above, it follows that the rigid quotation from the Bible was impossible in this case. Hence, Bach gives his variant: *quaerendo invenietis* instead of *quaerite, et invenietis*. He uses the verb *quaero* not in the imperative, but as gerund, a verbal noun. The inscription acquires a neutral form. Thus, not only the imperative, but also the inappropriate allusion to the Messiah and the disciples disappear. This corrected interpretation of the expression, however, does not solve the question of the exact meaning of the inscription. Nor does it answer the questions of what exactly should be sought, and why one should do so.

To What Does the Inscription Relate?

The question of the meaning of the inscription *quaerendo invenietis* is unsolvable without defining to what it relates. The question is not of no consequence, because there is no consensus

4 Hans T. David, "Bach's 'Musical Offering,'" *Musical Quarterly* 23, 3 (1937): 315.

5 Ew. Majestät selbst, ein Thema zu einer Fuge auf dem Clavier mir vorzuspielen geruhen, und allernädigst auferlegten, solches alsobald in Deroselben höchsten Gegenwart auszuführen. Ew. Majestät Befehl zu gehorsamen, war meine allerunterthänigste Schuldigkeit. BD, v. I doc. 173, S. 241.

about the answer among Bach scholars. Some state that it relates only to the two-voice canon (Canon a 2), following immediately after the six-voice ricercar (Ricarcar a 6). Others (not less assertively) say that there are two canons behind this inscription: both Canon a 2 and Canon a 4 (the one after the Ricercar a 6).

Some time ago, Spitta announced that the inscription related to both canons: “The solution of the last two [canons—A.M.]—one in two parts and the other in four, without a *Cantus firmus*—is not given by Bach, but the words: “Seek, and ye shall find” (*quaerendo invenietis*), are left to the ingenuity of the player or reader.”⁶

Spitta's idea about two canons eventually became quite popular in Bach studies. Many scholars support it. Thus, for example, Christoph Wolff wrote that Canon 10 is also the point of application of the motto, like Canon 9.⁷

This conception was even reflected in the Index of Bach's works (*Bach Werke Verzeichnis*) published by A. Dürr and Y. Kobayashi in collaboration with K. Beißwenger.⁸ In their edition, the motto *quaerendo invenietis* is placed above both canons thus:

Quaerendo invenietis
[4i.] Canon a 2 [4k.] Canon a 4

Scheme 1 Correlation of the motto and the canons in *BWV* by A. Dürr and Y. Kobayashi

Moreover, H.T. David considers that *quaerendo invenietis* related even to three canons: the two mentioned above, and the retrograde one: “That the two canons—a 2 and a 4—belong together is pretty obvious because they all bear the same type of title and all fail to indicate their solutions: the ‘*quaerendo invenietis*’ which heads the first of them must have been meant for all three.”⁹

At the same time, more than few scholars think that the motto under discussion belongs not to two or three canons, but solely to one: canon a 2 following the ricercar a 6.

Thus, Alfred Dörffel, one of the editors, and the author of commentaries and solutions of Bach's canons in the full collection of J.S. Bach's Works published by Bach-Gesellschaft (BG), writes that, by “Seek, and ye shall find!,” Bach calls for an application of shrewdness, seeking in the first of these canons what would help us find out how it should be.¹⁰

As follows from these words, the author emphasizes that the motto relates to the first of two canons.

This opinion, as well as the opposing one, also found its way into the reference editions, in particular in *BWV*, this time edited by Wolfgang Schmieder. Here, the idea of the *quaerendo invenietis* relationship differs from that presented in Scheme 1.

[6] Canon a 2 (Quaerendo invenietis) [7] Canon a 4

Scheme 2 The correlation between the motto and the canons in *BWV* edited by W. Schmieder

6 Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach...*, 195.

7 “Canon 10: Die Einsatzpunkte müssen nach der gleichen Devise wie bei Canon 9 gefunden werden.” [Chr. Wolff] *Johann Sebastian Bach. Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke. Serie VIII, Band 1. Kritischer Bericht* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1976), 116.

8 *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis. Kleine Ausgabe (BWV^{2a})* nach der von Wolfgang Schmieder vorgelegten 2. Ausgabe herausgegeben von Alfred Dürr und Yoshitake Kobayashi unter Mitarbeit von Kirsten Beißwenger (Leipzig, 1998), 443.

9 David, “Bach's ‘Musical Offering,’” 329.

10 “‘Suchet, so werdet ihr finden!’ ruft Bach bei dem ersten dieser Canons dem Forschenden zu, damit derselbe seinen Scharfsinn daran setze.” Alfred Dörffel, “Anhang.” In *Johann Sebastian Bach's Werke. Herausgegeben von Bach-Gesellschaft in Leipzig. BG Bd. 31.2. 1885, XV.*

Indeed, the question of correlation between the canons and the motto is a crucial one. The point is that scholars connect the motto to both canons with their shared quality: they are “puzzle” or “riddle” canons, demanding smart solutions. Ursula Kirkendale, for example, writes: “Bach’s heading ‘quaerendo invenietis’ (“by seeking you will find”) applies to the both, for both pieces are ‘riddle’ canons.”¹¹

Depending on whether the motto relates to one canon or both, each answer leads to additional important questions. If the inscription relates to both canons, it indicates a certain direction of what should be sought: parameters of the riddle canons, the notation of which is absent (for example, the interval of transposition for successive voice(s), their places of entry, canons’ inversability, etc.) In this case, investigation can be limited and reduced to seeking technical data regarding these canons. However, if the motto relates only to the first, two-voice canon (Canon a 2), then the issue of both canons’ riddle is not the question here, and there must be something unrelated to the second, four-voice canon (Canon a 4), but actual only for the first.

Qaerendo invenietis: For One Canon or Two?

To answer this question, we should look more closely at Bach’s graphic design style when he had to combine notes and verbal text in his scores. It is helpful in this regard to address the *Musical Offering* itself.

Two engravers worked on the *Musical Offering*: the brothers Georg and Heinrich Schübler. They also prepared the engraving copies (*Abklatschvorlagen*). However, Bach did the most difficult part of the work himself. It was a double sheet with five canons and Canonic fugue.¹²

Figure 1 presents the part of the page with the canons:



Figure 1 *Musical Offering*, part of the page with the canons

As we can see from Figure 1, Bach places the inscription relating to all the canons in the middle of the page. However, the information relating to each particular canon has been written on the left, next to the word *Canon*. If we look at the motto *quaerendo invenietis* placed after the six-voice Ricercar, we will see that the inscription is located on the left side, next to the word *Canon*. It is not in the middle of the page—as in information relating to one particular canon or another—but by no means is it equally close to all the canons or to the group of canons.

11 Ursula Kirkendale, “The Source for Bach’s *Musical Offering*,” *JAMS* 33 (1980): 119.

12 The “*Musical Offering*” was printed using an engraving technique on copper plates. The important role in this process was the so-called engraving copy (*Abklatschvorlage*). Its importance for researchers is in the fact that the final product presented the handwriting of the person who made the engraving copy intact. This made it possible to define unarguably what Bach’s intention was.

Therefore, considering Bach's graphic design style in his work with notes and verbal text, one can come to the obvious conclusion that the inscription *Quaerendo invenietis* relates exclusively to the two-voice canon, and not to both situated on this page.



Figure 2 The inscription *Quaerendo invenietis* above the two-voice canon

Seeking parameters of the riddle canons always seemed to be the most natural task in this situation. Hence, it was not by chance that this viewpoint was the most popular among scholars; it raised few doubts and was not subject to discussion. At most, some alternative opinion could be suggested, but without arguments.

Note, however, that riddle canons do not demand any special inscription. The polyphonic culture of the first half of the eighteenth century implied that everyone knew how to distinguish the riddle canon at first glance. It is hard to believe that Bach would express his lack of belief in musicians and, primarily, in the learned king. There was no point in his doing so. Therefore, to consider the motto as a route to seeking the parameters of the riddle canon seems senseless.

However, there can be an entirely different approach to solving the meaning of this inscription. I argue that it relates not to the peculiarities of this particular Canon, but to its place in the general structure of the *Musical Offering*. The Canon with the motto is located in the wrong place. However, prior to constructing the argument, one should totally revise both aspects of the inscription.

1. Relation to the Bible: *Quaerendo invenietis* is not a quotation from the Bible but the text of Johann Sebastian Bach.
2. Relation to a particular piece: the inscription relates to the Canon a 2, following Ricercar a 6.

Following these findings, we can conclude that the inscription above Canon a 2 states that the canon is in the wrong place. Not all is lost, however. A meticulous search leads us to the correct place. The key to this solution lies in research of the structural algorithm of the *Musical Offering*. The general structure of the composition, once revealed, indicates the correct place of the canon in question. While the author has already developed his version of reconstruction and interpretation of the *Musical Offering*,¹³ even before the above arguments were clarified, it seems important to add this new discussion regarding the enigmatic inscription.

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13 A. Milka, *Muzykal'noe prinoshenie I.S. Bakha. K rekonstruktsii i interpretatsii (Bach's Musical Offering: Toward Reconstruction and Interpretation)* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1999). The English summary of the book can be found on pp. 246-52. Available at (accessed: 8 December 2015):

https://vk.com/doc3241961_133139908?hash=38be38a531f928066b&dl=1d4bc11061f5982eca.