

THE *GALANT* STYLE IN
J. S. BACH'S *MUSICAL OFFERING*:
WIDENING THE DIMENSIONS

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What has been written about *galant* features in Bach's late works in general and the *Musical Offering* in particular has tended to focus on surface details.¹ As a result *galant* style is said to be characterized by simplified melody clearly articulated into short, balanced phrases, and employing such figures as triplets, syncopations, and appoggiatura "sigh" motives, dominating a thinned-out, polarized texture in which the bass part abandons any thematic engagement with the upper part for a sort of bland, generic diet of repeated notes and other similar patterns. The view that in the case of the *Musical Offering* these references to the *galant* style were intended by Bach both to demonstrate his engagement with progressive tendencies and to appeal to certain aesthetic sensibilities at the Potsdam court of the collection's dedicatee is widely accepted by Bach scholars. Recently a dissenting voice has been raised by Michael Marissen² who stresses the retrospective *stile antico* aesthetic of the work, which for him progressively assumes an increasingly theological character, a feature of the work that he interprets, at least in part, as a politico-religious gesture on Bach's part. In response not only to these conflicting positions but also to my own recent scholarly engagement with this work, I would like to put forth an interpretation that differs in important respects from prevailing views of the *style galant*.

¹ For a wide-ranging discussion of the *galant* in Bach's late works, see Robert Marshall, "Bach the Progressive," *The Musical Quarterly*, 62 (1976): 328–54. For a discussion focusing specifically on the *Musical Offering*, see Christoph Wolff, "New Research on Bach's *Musical Offering*," *The Musical Quarterly*, 57 (1971): 401–03.

² See Michael Marissen, "The Theological Character of J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering*," in *Bach Studies* 2, ed. Daniel R. Melamed (Cambridge, 1995), 85–106.