

The free organ works of Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713–1780) are eminently enjoyable to learn, perform, and listen to. They are available to any well-trained organist willing to invest dutiful practice. They pose no particular conundrums of registration. They please almost any audience. In a nutshell, they're *good music*. It seems unfair to point out that they simply aren't as *great* as the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, who taught two generations of Krebses (Johann Ludwig and his father, Johann Tobias). What organ music, after all, is as great as Bach's? The composers certainly reflect a similar idiom—breathe the same air, the influence of teacher on student, and their shared culture, is abundantly clear. Indeed, it often seems more than clear. Anyone who is well acquainted with Bach's free organ works will find more than a shared *Zeitgeist* with his student. One can often identify a clear model for a given Krebs work. It is interesting, even amusing, to walk through the two volumes published by Peters and note which Bach works leap to mind on page after page.

However, a closer look reveals that Krebs's musical borrowing is far subtler than it first seems. While certain ideas are clearly taken from Bach, others are just as conspicuously left out. Further, in a given piece, there is often more than one Bach model in evidence. Understanding this is the key to a really fruitful engagement of Krebs, not as a second-rate Bach or copycat, but as an original artist, fully a product (almost the *only* product) of the "Bach school." Though he was pervasively influenced by his great teacher, this would not lead us to dismiss his works altogether derivative. It is not. It just sounds that way . . . at first.

Conditions

The best source for the free organ works is the two-volume Peters edition. The volumes appeared widely spaced in time: the first, edited by Walter Zöllner, dates back to 1938; the second, by Karl Tittel, to 1974. Both editors are a bit nervous about the family resemblance between Krebs's works and Bach's. Zöllner writes: "In the present selection, we have not included works which are too obviously founded on a Bach model . . ." Tittel writes:

The five preludes and fugues published by Zöllner do not display any overstressed evidence of Krebs attempting to emulate Bach's style of writing. In this respect it is perhaps of interest to cite Spitta who remarks that, although Krebs was fond of imitating the thematic material and adopting in full the form of Bach's works, he nevertheless displays a certain originality.²

The impression is given—confirmed upon examination of the pieces—that Zöllner got the "most unique" [*sic*] pieces, and Tittel must labor to justify the works that have fallen to him. Both editors sense an uncomfortable proximity; but it was not the job of either to analyze it.

Praeludium und Doppelfuge

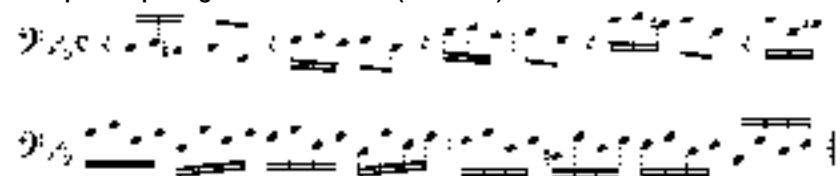
Regardless, there are strong echoes of Bach in both volumes; perhaps more so in Volume II, but perhaps more interestingly in Volume I. Consider the *Praeludium und Doppelfuge* in F minor, Volume I, page 16 ff. The parallels between the prelude and the *Prelude in B Minor*, BWV 544, are immediately apparent. There is a strikingly similar employment of 32nd notes; there is almost-identical passagework in the pedals; there is the same thinning-out of texture. Above all, there is the same high tragic tone. What spares the piece the stigma of plagiarism is, in part, the very different harmonic profile of the opening: where Bach offers dialogue, Krebs restates his theme repeatedly, in a lower register each time. Texturally, as well as rhetorically, there is not a great deal of difference.

Meanwhile, the fugue bears no resemblance at all to the B-minor fugue; that emulative honor goes to the double fugue in D minor in the same volume, page 58 ff. Here, the theme is constructed of conjunct eighth-note motion, like the fugue of 544. This fugue, however, contains a remarkable string of quotations in its midst. Starting in measure 192, there is an unmistakable parallel to measures 51–53, *inter alia*, of the "Wedge" prelude, BWV 548, followed immediately by a clear reference to the ending measures of the C-minor *Passacaglia*, just before the *thema fugatum* (measures 194–196 in Krebs, 165–168 in BWV 582). Just as this latter quotation concludes, the second theme of the double fugue is announced: the same material as Bach, at the same structural point.

Example 1. Opening of prelude, BWV 549



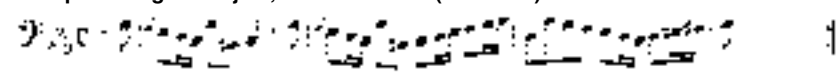
Example 2. Opening of Krebs C minor (volume II)



Example 3. Fugue subject, BWV 549



Example 4. Fugue subject, Krebs C minor (volume II)



So much quotation, in such a little space, from such disparate works! It is fair to infer that Krebs was so full of Johann Sebastian Bach that there wasn't always room for himself: so far from "the only Krebs in the Bach," sometimes only *Bach* was in the *Krebs*.

I have noticed a general tendency for Krebs not to use the same model for both halves of a prelude-fugue pair. Whether this comments on his sense of Bach's intended pairings or lack thereof, is the matter of another study. In general, though, he tends not to imitate the pairs as we have received them. I note a few possible exceptions to this. First, the *Prelude and Fugue in E Major*, in Volume I, starting on page 1, is perhaps reminiscent of the F-major toccata BWV 540, albeit with antiphonal effects reminiscent of the "Dorian" toccata BWV 538. The fugue, appropriately enough for either model, is cast in a vocal, *stile antico* fashion, at least up to a point. Also, in Volume II, the D-major (page 1 ff.) seems exuberantly modeled on the G-major, BWV 541, start to finish. (This prelude and fugue has long been the author's personal favorite.)

Prelude and Fugue in C Minor

In Volume II, some of Krebs's borrowings are obvious. Consider his *Prelude and Fugue in C Minor*, overtly modeled on Bach's C-minor Prelude and Fugue (also in D minor), BWV 549/549a. The similarity is clear at the outset, with a pedal exordium that is almost directly copied (Examples 1 and 2). Krebs's fugue subject, while shorter than Bach's, uses a similar antecedent-consequent, or "question and answer" format (Examples 3 and

4). The surprise is that the fugue turns out to be a double fugue, much closer in form and style to the "Legrenzi," BWV 574, among others. (This fugue, as well, begins with a repetitive subject.) As we have seen before, the prelude-fugue pair does not look to the same model.

Meanwhile, gone altogether from Krebs are the North German *stylus fantasticus* sections that feature prominently in all three of his models, the prelude and both fugues. What Krebs consistently *omits* to borrow is just as intriguing as what he uses—here, the archaic features of the early Bach canon. There are, for example, no showy showers of passagework at the final cadences. The pieces, rather, show a marked preference for straightforward, even unsentimental conclusions.

So, in Krebs's C-minor prelude and fugue, we have a prelude that clearly references a Bach prelude, and a fugue that betrays an intertextual web of references. (*Intertextual*: a term from literary criticism, applied to music by such theorists as Robert Hatten. He distinguishes one kind of intertextuality, called *strategic*, where specific quotations or references are marshaled; from another called *stylistic*, a pervasive and general spirit of reference.³)

Prelude and Fugue in A Minor

Another prelude-fugue pair of Krebs, in A minor (volume II, page 23), shows the same approach to borrowing. The prelude is easily mapped: it is solidly based on the *Tocatta in F*, BWV 540. The time signature is the same, as is the opening passagework over a tonic pedal. After some time spent with canonic man-

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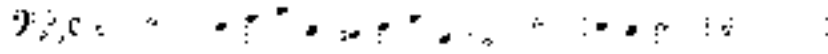
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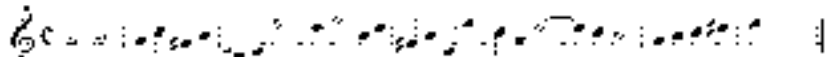
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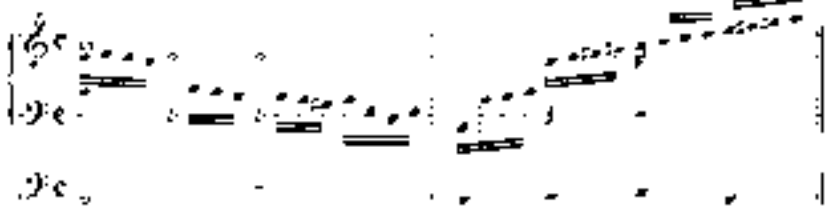
Example 6. Fugue subject, Krebs A minor (volume II)



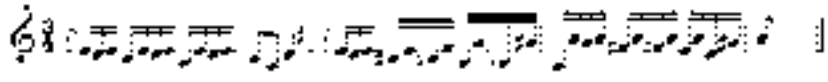
Example 7. BWV 548, measures 59–60



Example 8. Krebs A minor, measures 91–92 (Volume II)



Example 9. Subject, Krebs A-minor fugue, BWV Anh. 181



ual figurations, there is—guess what?—a pedal solo! There are many harmonic divergences between the two, though sequences involving third-inversion secondary-dominant harmonies are highly evocative of the model. The piece is well crafted and exciting, and would doubtless have a secure place in the canon, if only we could forget about Bach!

So much for the prelude. The fugue is another matter altogether. Here Krebs's borrowing is again very different, much subtler, and quite interesting. We have nothing even remotely resembling the fugue that follows the Bach toccata. The A-minor fugue is not a double fugue, nor does it contrast *alla breve* and *stile muovo*. If anything, its theme bears a slight resemblance to BWV 546 (Example 5)—but it lacks the melodic coherence and harmonic promise of its model (Example 6).

This is not a great, or even particularly good, subject. The coiled watchspring of the Bach theme has been unwound, its potential energy lost. The main charm of Krebs's theme consists in its more-than-fair share of surprises, most of them intervallic. In eight measures, we have an augmented second, a diminished fourth, two diminished fifths, and two octave leaps! But rather than conjure magic from simple means, Krebs offers us a few striking thematic peculiarities up front, and makes comparatively little of them. Similarly, his rhythmic profile can't (or won't) settle between *stile antico* and a kind of emergent classicism.

This theme admits of a real answer in the dominant, yet for some reason Krebs gives it a *tonal* answer in the *subdominant*. This choice—which strikes one as capricious—is no borrowed Bachian gambit. If anything, it is a minor masterpiece of changing musical style. Its very capriciousness, like that of the theme, is mannered, an affected neurosis, the handling of a musical form no longer instinctively understood. Finally, the keyboard idiom is noticeably awkward throughout—a marked contrast to the fluency of the toccata. (One can almost hear Krebs exclaim, "Fugues were *supposed* to be weird!")

Thus far, insofar as borrowing is concerned, we have little to go on, except an echo of a quotation and a familiar stylistic context: both strategic and stylistic intertextuality. But at measure 91, we run abruptly into another Bach model—once again, the "Wedge" fugue (Examples 7 and 8). The "Wedge" is of course the subject of many a study; one of its most-celebrated attributes is its

complex architecture. Astoundingly, the entire exposition is repeated, sonata-like, giving the whole a vast ABA form. In the B section, the Vivaldian model prevails, with alternations between *concertino* passagework and the *ripieno* return of the subject. Further reiteration of this information is needless.

While Krebs's passagework, running from m. 91 to 116, certainly looks and feels "Wedge-like," the resemblance turns out, again, to be only skin-deep. For one thing, the fugue's overall architecture is completely different from that of the "Wedge." There is no return to the exposition; the form is not ABA, but ABC. Krebs works with his theme for a while, takes a break, and then carries on again, much as if to say, "Now, where was I?" But in the B section itself, there is neither any symmetry nor any returns of the theme. Scalar passages in the circle of fifths yield to ornamental figurations over an ostinato pedal. The B section then itself takes an AB form. Meanwhile, the outer wings of the work—sections A and C—are

through-composed, Krebs simply "following his bliss."

Ironically, Krebs has another fugue, formerly attributed to Bach as BWV Anh. 181, in A minor, which is unmistakably indebted to the "Wedge" for its theme (Example 9). But to return to the first A-minor fugue: to be sure, Krebs honors what by his day was a set rule of fugue writing, when he enters his theme in four voices and follows with an episode. The basic model of theme-episode-theme informs the strictly fugal sections of the work, with a *souppçon* of virtuosity in the middle. (BWV Anh. 181, by contrast, is an orthodox *Spielfuge*, with neither interludes nor *ritornelli*.)

Differences in contrapuntal treatment

Another feature lacking here—as in most of Krebs's organ works—is any of the contrapuntal pyrotechnics expected in Bach. There are no sudden and surprising inversions, augmentations, or retrogrades. There is no *stretto*. There are none of the superlative eruptions of chromaticism that Bach dishes out so inimitably in the final bars of so many of his best pieces.⁴ (When, on very rare occasion, Krebs sets a theme in inversion, he announces it all over again, while calling attention to the technique with a superscription.⁵) Whether Krebs lacks the inclination for harmonic and contrapuntal pyrotechnics, or the *chops*, is an interesting question.

We do know that, by the time the third fugal voice has entered in measure 17, the piece has yielded up its last surprise, unless the B section is surprising. We cannot evade the implicit judgment of Art, which teaches us that it is nobler to bring much out of little than the reverse. It has to be said candidly, if with regret, that this fugue is at least to some extent an exercise in *parvum in multo*.

I have not, by any means, fully explored the intertextual ground of Krebs's free organ works. Further examples could have been cited; many another paper could be written. The question should also be asked: how are these pieces *different*? Critics speak of an emerging classical style in Krebs, a new architecture no longer sure what to do with Baroque building materials. There is some truth to this. There are passages where Krebs almost seems to be marking contrapuntal time, far more interested in harmony or emotional content. For this author, much of the previously discussed fugue in A minor (see, in particular, measures 156 ff.) fits this description. Little is accomplished of contrapuntal moment; the right-hand part feels almost crude. At times, one almost wishes for a dampener pedal! Yet a certain mass of sound is

achieved, perhaps pointing towards another esthetic altogether.

But therein also lies a precious insight. A sympathetic student of Krebs should not hold the composer up to comparison with Bach; would you like that standard applied to you? Rather, one should try to see past the borrowings—the persistent sense of pastiche—and try to hear what Krebs is trying to say. If this can be done—if one can hear Krebs despite the echoes—the organist will sense a kindred spirit, and can, I believe, really start to enjoy this repertoire.

Johann Ludwig Krebs outlived Bach by a good 30 years, and Bach was widely considered conservative, even dated, in his day. In his awkwardness with fugue form—in his frequent overreaching and lack of formal plan—was Krebs looking forward, even as he thought he was looking back?

Also, in encountering the organ works of Krebs one has an opportunity to hear something much closer to the mainstream. What was it really like to go to church in Germany in the long aftermath of Bach, and hear one of the best practitioners at work, playing with *Kraft* and *Feuer*? With genius comes a certain isolation; Krebs may be more representative of the norm than the transcendent *Thomaskantor* could ever be.

There is in Krebs's music a joy, an exuberance, an earnest good nature, that should be judged on its own merits. The shadow of a genius makes a brilliant man almost disappointing. It takes empathy to accept the clear Bach references in Krebs, and then hear past them to a distinctive and strangely fresh voice.

Notes

1. Preface to Volume I, Edition Peter Schaffer, 4179, 1938.
2. Preface to Volume II, Edition Peter Schaffer, 8122, 1974.
3. Robert Hatten, "The place of intertextuality in music studies," *American Journal of Semiotics* 3.4 (1985): 69–82. Cited in Robin Elliott, "Intertextuality in R. Murray Schafer's Adieu Robert Schumann," *Institute for Canadian Music Newsletter* 1.3 (September 2003), 3–12.
4. For examples of "superlative eruptions of chromaticism," see the endings of, for example, the great *Kyrie*, *Gott, heiliger Geist*, the three-verse *O Lamm Gottes*, *unschuldig die Allabreve in D*; the *Crucifixus* from the B-minor Mass; the *adagiosissimo* moment in *O Mensch, beweine*; and others.
5. See, for example, Volume I, p. 66, m. 28.

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