



STEFANO GRECO  
classical concert pianist

## Bach: A Musical Offering

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An acrostic, cryptic messages,  
enigmas in Latin...  
An intricate way to the solution

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## Bach: A Musical Offering

Year of composition: 1747

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### Historical notes

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, in his biography of Bach, tells us that Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel was employed as court musician at the residence of King Frederick II of Prussia, great music lover and amateur flutist. The King had long insisted to meet Carl Philipp Emanuel's father, Johann Sebastian. The encounter took place in Potsdam, the 7th of May, 1747.

Frederick wanted to show the elder Bach a novelty, the piano, which had been invented some years earlier. The King owned several of the experimental instruments being developed by Gottfried Silbermann. During his anticipated visit to Frederick's palace in Potsdam, Bach, who was well known for his skill at improvising, received from the King a long and complex musical theme on which he improvised a three-voice and an eight-voice fugue.

At the end of his performance, Bach promised to the King to compose a whole work on his theme, and so he did. His Musical Offering was given to the king as a gift on July of the same year.

### A controversial order

The order of publication of the Musical Offering has remained a mystery, because this work had been divided into 5 separate sheets, without page numbers. Ursula Kirkendale wrote an article in 1981, on the *Journal of American Musicological Society*, in which she theorized an order that has almost become nowadays standard, inspired to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.

Greco found out that Bach, for his two last works, which he composed during the same years, got the inspiration from a book that had been published 100 years before. The parallel between these works and that ancient text naturally revealed that every piece composing the Musical Offering and the Art

of Fugue recalls particular rhetoric figures. This comparison also solved numerous enigmas that so far were considered impenetrable; it also produced an order that is perfectly superimposable to *Institutio Oratoria* of Quintilian, as Kirkendale said, but progressively, word by word and chapter by chapter (while the American musicologist had considered the Latin work in a random order).

Thanks to this order, some pieces of the Musical Offering, which are normally performed far from each other, once put together reveal analogies and symmetries that had so far been neglected.

### The enigmas and their solution

The entire work of Bach has an enigmatic character: for example, it contains an acrostic (*Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta - RICERCAR*), Latin phrases that invite to research (*Quaerendo Invenietis*) and recall extra-musical topics (*Ascendenteque Modulatione Ascendat Gloria Regis*), titles that contain Latin and Greek and are apparently contradictory (*Fuga Canonica in Epiadiapente*), clefs that are both upside down and back to front (as in the image in the next page). All the enigmas, non excepted, find immediate solution in Greco's research.

### Ideal setting

The ideal performance of the Musical Offering would require a small chamber group, composed by a flute, a violin, a cello and a harpsichord or a piano, according to the placement that one intends to give to the concert.

### Program

- J.S. Bach: A Musical Offering BWV 1079
- Duration: 50 minutes + talk.





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