

“Ricercare” from *Musical Offering* [Musikalisches Opfer], BWV 1079

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

B. March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany

D. July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany

arr. ANTON WEBERN

B. December 3, 1883, Vienna, Austria

D. September 15, 1945, Mittersill, Austria

Premiered April 25, 1935 in a BBC Symphony Orchestra broadcast in London with Webern conducting; commissioned by Universal Edition.

Scored for flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, timpani, harp, and strings (approx. 8 minutes).

You might not guess by hearing it, but composers Anton von Webern and Johann Sebastian Bach have much in common. Both loved puzzles, complex structures, and counterpoint. Also, both were champions of innovative ways to organize musical pitches — Bach with equal temperament and Webern with the 12-tone system.

The *Musical Offering* was written by Bach in 1747 for Frederick II of Prussia. The collection of ricercars, canons, and a sonata stands as one of music history’s most impressive contrapuntal feats.

Webern liked to call this orchestration “his” Bach fugue, inferring that he had created something quite different from the original. He achieved this with a modern compositional technique (made famous by his teacher Arnold Schoenberg) known as *Klangfarbenmelodie* [tone-color melody], in which a melody moves from one instrument group to another, each offering its distinctive timbral coloring to a few notes of the melody before it moves along to another set of players. Tone-color melody is employed here to emphasize important harmonic, motivic, and structural aspects of the work. For instance, the sixth and seventh notes of the subject, presented first among the brass instruments, are always played on a different instrument than that which plays the first five notes. The texture is kept thin until the end, with only a few instruments playing at a time, assuring that the lines are heard clearly.

As Bach’s original was written in open score (lacking instrument designations or dynamics), Webern’s reimagination is in keeping with the Bach tradition. Webern’s realization is in many ways a tribute from one great music contrapuntalist to the inspiration and skill of his predecessor.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Bach’s “Ricercare” from *Musical Offering* on July 7, 1995 with Dmitri Sitkovetsky conducting.

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Bach/Webern, *Musical Offering: Ricercare*, Christoph Poppen conducting the Munich Chamber Orchestra, ECM B0000048.

Program note by Sarah Gerk, doctoral student in musicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance.