Johann Sebastian Bach’s Fuga (BWV 1001/1000) is a well-known and commonly performed piece in classical guitar concerts. Given Bach’s penchant for pairing movements, such as prelude and fugue, or toccata and fugue, I found appropriate for my transcription of the Praeludium to precede the Fuga, making the duration of the two pieces combined more suitable for classical guitar recitals. This transcription of the Praeludium allows for a good pairing with the transcription of Fuga in “A” minor (BWV1000/ 1001/ 539), becoming Praeludium et Fuga, where the present transcription of the Fuga offers a different perspective to guitarists, compared to the original violin version from which most guitar arrangements are based on.

Besides arranging the works of contemporaries such as Antonio Vivaldi and Alessandro Marcello, Bach tended to arrange his works for different instrumental settings. The most well-known example is the Preludio from the violin Partita no. 3, BWV 1006. He re-arranged it under the title Sinfonia in cantatas Herr Gott, Beherrscher aller Dinge, BWV 120a and Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir, BWV 29. For the famous G minor violin Fuga, BWV 1001, there are also two arrangements under Bach’s work catalog: the lute Fugue, BWV 1000, and the organ Fuga, from Praeludium et Fuga in D minor, BWV 539. However, there is an authenticity issue regarding the lute version: the only tablature source that came down to us is almost certainly by Johann Christian Weyrauch (1694-1771, German lutenist, organist, and Bach's Pupil.) If Bach made the arrangement, he would likely have notated the piece with the two-staff system as he did for his Suite pour La Luth, BWV 995.

On the other hand, for Praeludium et Fuga, BWV 539, since the three-voice texture of the Praeludium matches the five-voice texture of the Fuga differently to the original three-voice texture of the Adagio to the four-voice texture of the Fuga, I am left to wonder why Bach chose to write a new organ prelude instead of transcribing the Adagio from the same violin Sonata, BWV 1001. For the Fuga, why is there an extra entry in the exposition? Why did Bach change the specific notes that alter the harmony from the original violin version? In my opinion, an extra entrance/voice expands the composition horizontally and vertically in the meantime: It prolongs the length of the piece and allows the organist to present the full register of the organ. Bach also transposed the Fuga from G minor to D minor, which is a better key for organ. When transcribing a piece from an instrument to another, the register, the sonority, and physical challenges are essential to consider. For instance, when talking about the register, the highest note of the original violin Fuga is F; however, the highest note of the organ is either C or D, which is not high enough. In this situation, to try to keep the transcription in the original key makes the music mostly stay in the middle-low register, which cannot project the beauty of exploring the whole register of the organ well. This concept of transcribing music from other instruments to the organ is similar to transcribing music to the guitar. For example, the transcription of Bach’s cello suite no. 1, BWV 1007 in D major, has a better sonority performance than in G major, which is the original key of the piece.

The Fuga from the violin sonata, BWV 1001, or the lute Fugue, BWV 1000, has been in the classical guitar repertoire for more than a century. Guitarists nowadays tend to play such works in the original key of G minor as opposed to Segovia’s and Bream’s versions in A minor. One of the reasons is that more and more guitarists try to give the performance and recording of the complete six Bach violin sonatas and partitas nowadays, and to perform the Fuga in G minor helps to differentiate itself from the Second Violin Sonata, BWV 1003, which is in the key of A minor. However, the frequency of pitch “A=440” back to the Baroque period varied locally from lower than 400 Hz to even higher than 450Hz. It means that a piece in G minor might sound higher or lower to people nowadays. Also worth mentioning is the fact that playing Bach’s Violin Sonata, BWV 1001 in G minor with the pitch frequency of A=440, does not represent the Baroque pitch.

On the other hand, the transcription of Fuga in A minor has its unique color and beauty as it suits the instrument better. In my opinion, arranging Praeludium et Fuga in A minor allows for the use of more open strings. The usage of open strings is essential for transcribing an organ piece for guitar since the open strings naturally sound with more resonance, and it is easier to produce a fuller sound needed to imitate the organ effects. As both the transcriber and the performer, I realized that making sure the transcription of a keyboard piece friendly playable is crucial as it is the pre-step of presenting the music. Since the medium for conveying the music is the guitar, not the organ, specific adaptations and sacrifices need to be made for the piece to be idiomatic to the guitar. When the performer feels comfortable, the audience feels comfortable, and the musical affect can be achieved.

Bach’s craftsmanship of transcription is an art. Understanding Bach’s transcriptions makes the musicians appreciate his work more, and that is also the reason why I started to work on my version of Praeludium et Fuga, BWV 539, for solo guitar.

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