

J. S. Bach: 15 Two-Part Inventions

transcribed *for* solo guitar

transcribed by
Ken Hummer

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Introduction

The *Two-Part Inventions* of Bach offer a unique challenge to the transcriber and solo guitarist alike. To the former, it is the challenge of making the two voices flow naturally on the more limited (but not less noble) resources of the guitar fretboard. In short, solutions must be found that do not hinder the flow of either voice or get in the way of the basic intent of Bach's phrasing. To the latter, it is the challenge of mastering a never-ending array of left-hand finger combinations and positions, while preserving clarity between the two voices.

This seems all the more daunting because Bach, in his introduction to the work, calls for the development of a "singing" style of playing. Thus, just to play the notes (though quite an accomplishment in itself) does not assure an authentic rendering of the music. Indeed, once the correct notes are in place, due consideration must be given to the aesthetic use of phrasing, dynamics and ornamentation as it occurs in the music of Bach.

It goes without saying that the *Two-Part Inventions* offer a wealth of technical and musical challenges. For the student who wishes to improve his or her sight-reading ability, these transcriptions will serve admirably well; and for the serious musician who is always seeking out new repertoire, these transcriptions will be well suited for performance. May you get as much fulfillment out of discovering these musical masterpieces as I did out of helping them find a voice on the guitar.

Ken Hummer
 Lourdes College
 Sylvania, Ohio

Background

The *Klavierbüchlein* (*Little Clavier Book*), begun in 1720 by J. S. Bach, was a collection of "teaching" pieces written for his son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Most of the *Two-Part* and *Three-Part Inventions* that we know today are contained in this work. If one were to view the original manuscript, it would be noted that these were works "in progress." They are filled with corrections and revisions, sometimes so abundant that the notation is barely legible.

A manuscript dating from 1723 (the Spohr autograph) contains all of the 15 *Two-Part Inventions* and the 15 *Sinfonias* (*Three-Part Inventions*) that we know today. Bach's long, rambling title to the work spells out several main points:

- It is written for those who love the clavier and have a real thirst for knowledge.
- Its purpose is to help them play cleanly in two voices and then proceed to three voices.
- Its purpose is to give them good ideas (inventions) to develop a "singing" style of playing and a sense of good compositional technique.

Two autograph manuscripts found in the Berlin Library (the Spohr and the Griepenkerl) appear as more mature and finalized versions of the pieces contained in the *Little Clavier Book*. It is from these three sources that the numerous editions of the *Two-* and *Three-Part Inventions* have been made over the years.

The inventions are written for the clavichord, which was simply known as the "clavier" in Bach's day. He favored it for its ability to produce a *cantabile* (singing) style of playing. With the inventions, he actually created a new form for the clavier. Up to this time it was customary for the shorter clavier pieces to be written in a binary song form (that is, A-B); but with the inventions he gave free play to the development of musical ideas (motives and themes) rather than to melodies. That is the true genius of these inventions, that Bach can take a short idea and run it through its paces, creating such masterworks of variety that are a sheer joy to experience.

Preliminary Thoughts

Tempo

In consulting the various keyboard editions of the *Two-Part Inventions*, one can see a wide range of suggested tempo markings indicated by the different editors. Likewise, in recordings as well as live performances, one can experience quite dramatic differences in tempo. Bach gave little indication of tempo in his works. As a result, the individual musician is called upon to wisely determine the appropriate tempo. It is recommended that the reader discover the tempo based not on just the sheer number of notes per measure, but on the demands of the phrasing and accentuation.

Dynamics

Likewise, dynamic markings do not abound in the music of Bach. When they are used, it is usually to indicate *piano* and *forte*. The large number of dynamic markings in use today, especially *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, were not a feature of Baroque music. Needless to say, the modern-day editions of the *Two-Part Inventions* are filled with dynamic markings, all editorial, and all meant to aid the performer in interpreting the music of Bach. It is recommended that the reader take this into account when interpreting the dynamics of these pieces. I have purposely avoided the use of dynamic markings, consistent with Bach's own practice. I encourage readers to discover the proper dynamic for themselves.

Any use of *piano* or *forte* should take into account the "terraced" feature of Baroque music: that is, a whole period or section should be played at one dynamic level, not to change until the next period or section. Beyond that, the use of *crescendo* and *decrescendo* should be kept to a minimum in keeping with Bach's own style.

Ornamentation

Ornamentation abounds in the music of Bach, indeed, much as it does in all Baroque music. The performer of Bach's day was expected to be able to ornament, spontaneously and in good taste, even the simplest of melodies. The earliest editions of the *Two-Part Inventions* have differing amounts of ornamentation. This does not cast doubt on their authenticity, but rather comments on their development from the first book of pieces written for the instruction of his son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. In making this performance edition, I have kept the ornamentation to a minimum. The guitar has its own technical challenges, and an abundance of ornamentation would make the separate voices too difficult to play in many instances.

Phrasing and Accentuation

These two areas are key to a correct understanding and interpretation of the music of Bach. The vast majority of Bach's phrases begin on the upbeat and flow inexorably toward a downbeat, only to begin again on the next upbeat. Care must be taken through phrasing and accentuation to make this clear to the listener. In other words, the melodies of Bach do not respect the bar line. To emphasize the downbeat of the measure will lead to a particularly uninspired interpretation of Bach. What is called for is a real sensitivity to how notes are grouped together to create motives, how motives are grouped together to create phrases, and how the phrases are grouped together to create long flowing melodic lines.

Analysis and Performance Notes

Invention I

m. 1 This invention is built around a simple eight-note motive, which occurs in the first half of the measure in the upper voice. It is then echoed by the lower voice in the second half. Even though the upper-voice motive is played on the lower strings, use *i* and *m* in order to differentiate it from the echo in the lower voice (which should be played by *p*). Take care to articulate the eight-note grouping of the motive so that its shape will be clear every time it is used.

m. 2 The motive is now played a fifth higher, first in the upper voice, then in the lower voice.

mm. 3–4 The motive is now heard four times in a row in the upper voice in contrary motion. A slight accent on the first note of the motive each time it occurs will keep these measures from sounding like running sixteenth notes and will give some overall shape to the measures by emphasizing the groupings.

m. 5 Make every effort to sustain the F \sharp and D at the end of the measure as the first finger extends down to grab the A. This will take some practice, but it is worth the effort to be able to slide the fingers smoothly through the changes.

mm. 7–12 The motive now occurs a total of 12 times, sometimes in its original form, and sometimes in contrary motion, as it is tossed between the voices. Remember to shape the eight notes of the motive each time it occurs.

mm. 11–14 These measures serve as a transition to the relative minor key of A minor at measure 15.

mm. 15–18 The motive is tossed around between the voices in one form, then the other. Give the half notes a little extra emphasis to help them “sustain” in the ears of the listener. Also, when the half note is a fingered note, be very careful not to lift the finger as doing so would cut the sound.

mm. 19–21 The motive appears five times in a row as running sixteenths: four times in its original form and once in contrary motion. The piece then comes to a quick end.

Invention II

Above all else, the correct understanding and interpretation of this invention rests upon recognizing its canonic nature. (The exact canonic repetition of the lines will not be as obvious in this guitar arrangement as in the original keyboard score. Sometimes it has been necessary to change octaves, even within the middle of a theme, to facilitate execution upon the fretboard.)

mm. 1–2 Theme A is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 3–4 Theme A is now taken up by the lower voice while the upper voice continues with a new counterpoint, theme B.

mm. 5–6 Theme B is now in the lower voice, and a new theme, C, is in the upper voice.

mm. 7–8 Theme C is now in the lower voice, and a new theme, D, is in the upper voice.

mm. 9–10 Theme D is now in the lower voice, and a new theme, E, is in the upper voice.

mm. 11–20 All five themes are presented with the same canonic scheme, only this time they occur a fifth higher in the dominant key of E minor.

mm. 21–22 Transitional material returns us to the original key.

mm. 23–24 A reprise of theme A is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 25–26 A reprise of theme B is presented in the upper voice and theme A in the lower voice, leading to a quick ending.

Invention III

This entire invention is developed out of two themes: theme A in measures 1 and 2, and theme B in measures 12 and 13. They are not used again in their entirety until measures 38 and 42. If we designate the first full measure of theme A as motive 1 and the second full measure as motive 2, we can observe how what follows is built in one way or another out of these two motives of theme A.

mm. 1–2 Theme A is heard first in the upper voice.

mm. 3–4 Theme A is echoed in the lower voice.

mm. 5–10 Motive one is repeated six times: five times in the upper voice and once in the lower voice.

mm. 12–13 Theme B is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 14–15 Theme B is heard in the upper voice.

mm. 16–17 Theme B is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 18–19 Theme B is heard in the upper voice.

mm. 20–41 The two motives are tossed back and forth between the voices.

mm. 42–46 Theme A finally returns in its entirety, first in the upper voice, then in the lower voice.

mm. 47–57 The first motive is heard eight more times before the invention comes to an end.

Invention IV

mm. 1–2 The theme is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 3–4 The theme is now echoed in the lower voice.

mm. 5–6 The theme is restated in the upper voice.

mm. 7–16 A similar version of the theme is used five times, twice in the upper voice and three times in the lower voice, as it wanders through different degrees of the scale. Note how the theme is used to shape the rest of the invention. Be sure to give a well-articulated shape to the theme as it occurs in its original form or in one of its slight variations.

mm. 19–21 Repeating the A in the upper voice is an approximation of the effect created by a sustained three-measure trill.

mm. 18–19 In measure 18, keep the third finger firmly planted on the final B. This will facilitate the playing of the B occurring after the C# in measure 19.

mm. 20–21 Likewise, keep the second finger firmly planted on the final D of measure 20 to prepare for the D occurring after the E in measure 21.

mm. 29–33 Repeating the C# in the lower voice is an approximation of the effect created by a sustained five-measure trill.

m. 35 Grab the final G# of the measure with a five-string barre. This makes it much easier to move to the second-position barre in the next measure.

mm. 44–45 Keep the second finger firmly planted on the final G of measure 44 to prepare for the G occurring after the A# in measure 45.

Invention V

Note throughout the invention how the running sixteenth notes form a countermelody to the main theme whether it occurs in the upper or lower voice, or whether it is the entire theme or just a motive of the theme.

mm. 1–4 The main theme of this invention occurs as a four-measure melody in the upper voice while a flowing sixteenth-note countermelody is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 5–8 The same four-measure theme is echoed by the lower voice in the dominant while the upper voice states its version of the countermelody.

mm. 9–12 and **mm. 20–28** The first measure of the main theme forms a motive, which is tossed about in different keys and between the voices throughout the invention. Every time the motive enters, be sure to emphasize its entry and articulate it well throughout.

m. 10 Note the shift to position II on the second beat. This will facilitate the left-hand fingering needed on beats three and four.

m. 12 Placing the third finger on G simultaneously with the fingering of C and A will greatly facilitate the playing of A-G-A that follows. Take care to play G# in this measure—it is raised to G# in the next measure.

mm. 29–30 Each measure uses the third measure of the theme as a motive.

m. 31 The fourth measure of the theme is used in the subdominant.

Invention VI

A unique feature of this invention is the use of two themes played simultaneously in contrary motion. When the two voices are moving in contrary motion, it is especially important to “walk” the fingers in as sustained and legato a fashion as possible. Use a clear, crisp articulation throughout the invention, taking great care to sustain notes for their full values.

mm. 1–8 The two themes used in measures 1–4 switch voices in measures 5–8.

m. 5 Be sure to accent the second A so that it is abundantly clear that it belongs to the lower-voice theme and is not merely a repetition of the upper-voice A.

mm. 9–20 Motivic figures built off of the themes now wander through various keys until being firmly established in the dominant key of E major at the double bar.

m. 21 Be sure to accent the second E to make clear that it belongs to the lower voice.

mm. 21–28 The original themes are presented in the key of the dominant in measures 21–24 and then switch voices in measures 25–28.

mm. 29–42 The two voices again wander through various keys until the key of A major is re-established for a return to the original themes in measures 43–50.

mm. 43 Be sure to accent the second A to make clear that it belongs to the lower voice.

Invention VII

m. 1 A seven-note motive is stated in the tonic key of A minor in the upper voice and then echoed in the lower voice.

m. 2 The motive is stated in the dominant in the upper voice and then echoed in the lower voice.

mm. 3–4 The motive is stated four more times, alternating between the voices in gradually descending degrees.

mm. 5–6 Transitional material brings us to the relative major key of C at measure 7.

mm. 7–8 The repeating G is an approximation of the effect created by a sustained two-measure trill. Do not overemphasize it, but let it “sustain” lightly above the bass.

mm. 11–12 Note how the motive occurs in the upper voice with its lower-voice echo occurring even before it is finished. The motive then occurs again in the upper

voice even before it is finished in the lower voice. It then occurs one more time in the lower voice, but this time separated from the upper-voice motive.

mm. 15–17 The repeating bass E is an approximation of the effect created by a sustained two-measure trill. Do not overemphasize it, but let it “sustain” lightly below the treble.

mm. 13–23 All of the sixteenth-note patterns that follow from here to the end can be looked upon as derived from the initial seven-note motive. Pay special attention to the grouping of these notes and accentuation to make clear the distinction between upper and lower voices.

Invention VIII

mm. 1–7 Note how these first seven measures proceed according to a canonic scheme: What is stated in measure 1 in the upper voice is then echoed in measure 2 in the lower voice; what is stated in measure 2 in the upper voice is then echoed in measure 3 in the lower voice; and so on through measure 7.

m. 4 For ease of execution, be sure to shift the second finger between the C# and D without lifting it from the string.

m. 5 Keep the third finger firmly planted on the C#. Let it ring through the measure.

m. 6 Using the fourth finger is a little awkward, but it allows the F# to ring through as the C# and A are played. This will smooth out an otherwise disjointed-sounding part.

m. 7 Keep the third finger firmly planted on the fourth string and slide it between the F# and G#. This will make the position changes much easier to negotiate.

mm. 8–11 The sixteenth-note runs from the second and third beats of the theme in measure 2 are tossed around between the voices. They modulate to carry us solidly to the dominant key of E major at measure 12. Pay close attention to the phrasing of this motive to make it apparent throughout.

mm. 12–14 The theme is used in the lower voice in the dominant in measures 12 and 13. It is then echoed in the upper voice in measures 13 and 14.

m. 15 Transitional counterpoint.

m. 16 Theme in the lower voice.

m. 17 Theme echoed in the upper voice.

m. 18 Theme stated in the lower voice again.

mm. 25–26 Modulates from the dominant key of E major to the subdominant key of D major.

mm. 30–33 Uses the sixteenth-note runs from the theme as a motive that moves insistently to a strong ending in the tonic.

Invention IX

mm. 1–4 The upper voice displays the theme while the lower voice displays a counter-theme.

mm. 5–8 The theme now occurs in the lower voice while the counter-theme occurs in the upper voice. (Throughout the invention, these two themes are inseparable.)

m. 5 Keep the fourth finger firmly planted on the upper-voice A, while the first finger slides from B to C in the lower voice. Then take great care to sustain the lower-voice C as the fourth finger stretches from A to B in the upper voice. This fingering may seem a bit awkward at first, but it allows for the sustaining of both voices.

m. 6 Keep the first finger planted firmly on the lower-voice B while the fourth finger slides from the upper-voice D to C.

m. 7 Note the use of the half barre. Practice very carefully the slide with the barre from position II up to position VII. Play the notes as legato as possible without the sound of the slide.

mm. 7, 10, 13–15 Note the many spots where the first finger must extend down an extra fret while other fingers remain firmly planted on their respective notes. Take great care to ensure that the stopped notes continue to ring and that the planted fingers do not “drag along” with the extended finger.

mm. 9–11 The theme again starts in the upper voice and the counter-theme in the lower voice, but very quickly both themes begin to wander.

mm. 12–14 These are an imitation of measures 9–11, but a fourth lower.

mm. 15–28 Here, different motives of the theme and counter-theme are tossed back and forth in different keys in an almost unpredictable fashion until they lead back to the theme and counter-theme in measures 29–32.

mm. 29–32 Note the restatement of the theme in the upper voice, with a slight variation of the counter-theme in the lower voice.

Invention X

This invention is crafted from three motives, all very similar, which are tossed back and forth between the voices throughout the piece:

- **m. 1** Motive 1 is contained in the upper voice.
- **m. 4** Motive 2 is contained in the upper voice.
- **m. 10** Motive 3 is contained in the upper voice.

m. 1 Motive 1 is presented in the upper voice.

m. 2 Motive 1 is echoed in the lower voice.

m. 3 Transitional counterpoint.

mm. 4–6 Motive 2 is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 7–8 Motive 1 is heard in the upper voice.

m. 9 Motive 1 is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 10–12 Motive 3 is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 14–17 Motive 1 is tossed back and forth between the voices.

mm. 18–19 A variation of motive 2.

mm. 20–23 These four measures present motive 2 in the lower voice in contrary motion. (Note: Measure 21 is not arranged in strict contrary motion in order to keep the second voice of all four measures in the lower register.)

m. 20 Be sure to form the A minor chord at the beginning of the measure. This will greatly simplify the playing of C in the lower voice with the fourth finger.

mm. 24–25 A variation of motive 3 is heard in the upper voice.

m. 26 A variation of motive 2 is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 27–28 Motive 1 is presented in the upper voice.

mm. 29–31 A variation of motive 2 is heard in the upper voice.

m. 32 Ending.

Invention XI

This invention is characterized by the use of chromaticism, which gives it a sense of wandering almost aimlessly as Bach takes his theme and its constituent motives through their paces.

mm. 1–2 The main theme is set forth in the upper voice.

mm. 3–4 The main theme is echoed in the lower voice.

m. 6 The first measure of the theme is presented down a second in the upper voice.

mm. 7–8 Both measures of the theme are presented down a fourth in the lower voice.

mm. 9–10 Transitional counterpoint which leads to the dominant at measure 11.

mm. 11–17 Several motivic patterns are used from the theme, coupled together with key changes and chromaticism.

mm. 18–20 The main theme returns in the upper voice halfway through measure 18.

Invention XII

This invention uses two basic themes throughout and restates them many times in different keys, joining them by transitional counterpoint.

m. 1 Theme A is stated in the lower voice.

m. 2 Theme B is stated in the upper voice and quickly modulates to the dominant.

m. 3 Theme A is stated in the upper voice in the dominant.

m. 4 Theme B is stated in the lower voice in the dominant.

mm. 5–6 The theme in the lower voice returns to the tonic.

mm. 7–8 Transitional counterpoint leads to the relative minor.

m. 9 Theme A is heard in the lower voice in the relative minor.

m. 10 Theme B is heard in the upper voice in the relative minor.

m. 11 Theme A is heard in the upper voice in the mediant.

m. 12 Theme B is heard in the lower voice in the mediant.

mm. 12–13 The voices wander through several keys before establishing, by repetition, the tonic chord in measure 14.

mm. 14–16 The voices move as if trying to escape from the tonic again.

m. 17 The first notes of the measure leave no doubt about the tonic key as the voices settle into a gradually descending ending.

Invention XIII

mm. 1–2 The first half of each measure contains an eight-note motive in the upper voice, which is then echoed in the second half of each measure in the lower voice. Group the notes and stress them in such a way that the imitative counterpoint is abundantly clear.

mm. 3–6 These transitional measures prepare us for a restatement of the motive in the relative major in measures 7 and 8.

mm. 7–8 The motive is heard first in the upper voice in each measure, then in the lower voice.

mm. 14–17 Transitional elements move down a step at a time until reaching a restatement of the original motive in measure 18.

m. 18 The original motive occurs first in the upper voice, then in the lower voice.

mm. 19–21 Transitional measures.

m. 22 The motive is stated one last time in the upper voice in the second half of the measure.

mm. 23–25 Brings the invention to a close.

Invention XIV

The entire invention is a playful treatment of the ten-note motive that appears in the upper voice in the first half of measure 1. Like a magician, Bach takes these notes through their paces, rising and falling and moving through various keys to the inevitable return of the tonic key. Strong rhythmic grouping will give this invention the drive it needs to carry the listener along.

The slurs are editorial but quite necessary for the guitar to achieve gracefulness on the 32nd-note figures. The overall feeling should be relaxed and not rushed. Don't be fooled into playing your fastest because of the presence of 32nd notes. As difficult as this invention appears at first glance, everything lies very neatly on the fretboard and flows very naturally.

Use the scale-pattern thirds in measures 14, 15 and 16 to determine your overall tempo. This will be the most demanding section in terms of speed and legato playing. Begin with this section first, then go to the beginning once you have mastered it.

Invention XV

The theme is heard in 14 of the 22 measures of this short invention. Care should be taken through accentuation to make clear every entry of the theme. The running counterpoint in the upper voice tends to cover up the theme when it is in the lower voice. Strive to make the theme rise above the counterpoint in all cases.

mm. 1–2 The theme is heard in the upper voice.

mm. 3–4 The theme is heard in the lower voice in the dominant.

mm. 5–7 The theme is heard in the upper voice in the dominant.

mm. 8–11 Transitional counterpoint brings us to the relative major in measure 12.

mm. 12–13 The theme is heard in the lower voice in the relative major.

mm. 14–15 The theme is now heard in the upper voice down one step from the tonic.

mm. 16–17 Transitional counterpoint brings us back to the original theme in the tonic.

m. 18 The theme is heard in the lower voice.

mm. 19–22 The theme is heard in the upper voice in the second half of measure 19, leading to a quick ending.

Invention I

Musical score for Invention I, measures 1-10. The score is written in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The piece features a complex rhythmic pattern with frequent sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often beamed together. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and -1, -2, -3, -4. A 'PosIII' marking is present above the staff in measure 2. A double bar line with a repeat sign is used in measures 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9. A circled '2' with three dashes is above the staff in measure 3, and a circled '1' is below the staff in measure 3. A double bar line with a repeat sign is also present in measure 3. A double bar line with a repeat sign is present in measure 5. A double bar line with a repeat sign is present in measure 7. A double bar line with a repeat sign is present in measure 9.

Invention VII

(Original key: E minor)

