

SMARO GREGORIADOU: Reinventing Guitar

Bach preludes: the laconic messengers! **3**

“Any life, no matter how long and complex it may be, is made up of a single moment - the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he is.”

Jorge Luis Borges, *Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz*

Borges ingeniously talked about the **defining moment**, in which a person eventually realizes why he or she lived, who they really are; or are not.

Ancient Greek drama persistently negotiated with this kind of experience. For the adolescent *Antigone* the defining moment may well be when she decides to throw soil onto her dead brother's unburied and disreputable corps against the king Kreon's will, knowing that this action will lead her to death. *Medea*, *Agave*, *Prometheus* or *Oedipus* experienced their own moments of gravity. In a certain instant of their lives time freezes; dilemmas stop to exist; tragic awareness explodes; enlightenment emerges. And after that specific moment they cease to be the same!



In Fine Arts there is the term “**fertile moment**”. The artist captures the dynamic instant of transition between two actions that alternate mutually: a previous one comes to an end and a new one begins to develop. This “zero point” is so masterly conveyed that the spectator, while observing a statue or painting, cannot readily tell which one of the two actions is predominating; he feels they actually coexist. *Discobolus* (discus thrower) of Myron, one of the finest examples of the great progress that occurred in the Greek art from 6th to 5th century BC, depicts wonderfully this transcendental state.

The potential energy concentrated in the tightly-wound pose of this famous statue expresses the transitory moment between “**stasis**” (*holding*) and **release**. We see a supremely strained athlete who is going to throw away his discus in the next moment. But whether the athlete's right arm is reaching the farthest point of its backward movement, or is just beginning to move forward, it is hard to decide. Actually, his arm seems like balancing onto the air. More than a physical event, the sculptor has admirably grasped a mental state, the athlete's momentary **inner impulse** towards releasing the discus! And since in real life we cannot detect such transitory moments of action with our human senses¹, this remains the full property of the classic art and its fertile moments: they are so fleeting that seem impossible²!

We might very well translate Borges' moments, drama's moments, or fertile moments as allegorical expressions of certain states of the human consciousness. As such I would like to stress their existence in practically all of the *Bach's oeuvre*, but particularly in the *preludes, the laconic messengers*.

Near the end of these brief masterpieces we clearly meet a point of **decision, change, reversal, or transition**. Synthetically, this can occur by means of slight or bigger changes in rhythm, harmony, or melody. Structurally, modifications can occur mainly in **flow, density, or texture**. We see micro-textural development to move towards macro-textural patterns, and vice versa; symmetry to break into asymmetry, and vice versa. Polyphony can turn to monophony or even “*aphony*”, with significant silences (rather than “*pauses*”) that emerge unexpectedly. Mobility changes to immobility; and so on. *Bach's inventiveness* is once again supernatural!

Depending on the actual compositional context these essential modifications are either quite evident or externally invisible, and therefore often unconsciously passed over or awkwardly translated by performers as gaps, or opportunities for physical rest and inactivity or stagnation. Quite the opposite! Energy concentrates there more than anywhere else in the piece. It is exactly in those places that the interpreter's overall activation and participation are most urgently required in order for the energy to uninterruptedly proceed to its next alternation stage, keeping the inner movement -“**kinesis**”- as alive and vital as possible.

¹ This is maybe why this posture is said to be unnatural to a human, and today considered a rather inefficient way to throw the discus. Myron has taken a moment of action so transitory that specialists of athletics still debate if it is feasible!

² For another fine example of the fertile moment in Greek sculpture, see also the “[Wood chopper](#)” (*Xylothraustes*) by [Demetrios Philippotis](#), a marble statue of 1875.

I would like to give an example from the Prelude of the magnificent *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro BWV 998 in E_b major, original for lute or harpsichord by J. S. Bach*.

After more than 20 measures of 12/8, that establish a well defined flow of a masterly developed *linear polyphony*, the listener gets gradually familiar with the harmonic, rhythmic and melodic idiosyncrasy of the piece and follows readily the tonal landscape of E_b major (D major for guitarists). The opening embellishment

♩ e₁-d-e₁, used in almost every bar as an intervallic pattern of tone or semitone, stands as the most significant **motive-core** of the piece and forms its main melodic identity (Example 1). It is the same motive-core that builds thematically both the prelude and the fugue. Their overall development actually spreads from this modest material.

Rhythm is fluid, constant and predictable. No surprises!

musical score for Example 1: Prelude BWV 998, measures 1-8. The score is in 12/8 time and E_b major. It shows the first four measures of the piece. A blue arrow points to the first measure, labeled "motive-core". The melody in the right hand consists of eighth notes, while the left hand has a simple bass line. The piece ends with "etc".

Example 1: Prelude BWV 998, measures 1-8

In the middle of the piece, and after several harmonic fluctuations of the tonality true to the time and style, we reach the sub-dominant A_b major (G for guitarists), and the theme appears again identical a perfect 5th lower. From this point on, the motive-core starts to repeat itself more frequently, as the music passes from several tonic centers (Example 2).

musical score for Example 2: Prelude BWV 998, measures 25-34. The score is in 12/8 time and E_b major. It shows measures 25-34. A blue arrow points to measure 28, labeled "A_b major: from here starts to appear a persistent presence of the motive-core". The melody in the right hand is more complex, with many sixteenth notes. The piece ends with "etc".

Example 2: Prelude BWV 998, measures 25-34

The fertile moment's preparation starts at measure 36, where the basic tonality returns and the melodic structure is temporarily modified for the first time, reaching at measure 38 a point where the motive-core repeats itself persistently as a stretto miniature in A_b minor. Then, at measure 39, through an ascending motion in the tonic

environment of F_b , we finally reach the F_b chord with a striking appoggiatura and its resolution a_b ending up to a fermata (hold). This is to my view the *fertile moment of the piece!* It represents the discobolus' moment of transition between holding and releasing the discus. Measures 40 and 41 are there to support the intensity of this hold, and lead to the final exodus, where the theme appears again identical in the mother key, but rather redefined, i.e. enhanced with the new spirit that the overall procedure brought along with it (Example 3). The whole piece might well end at this point, but Bach as usually offers a few measures to further confirm the new situation, where the tonality triumphs after a long and tiresome way.

Example 3: Prelude BWV 998, measures 35-44

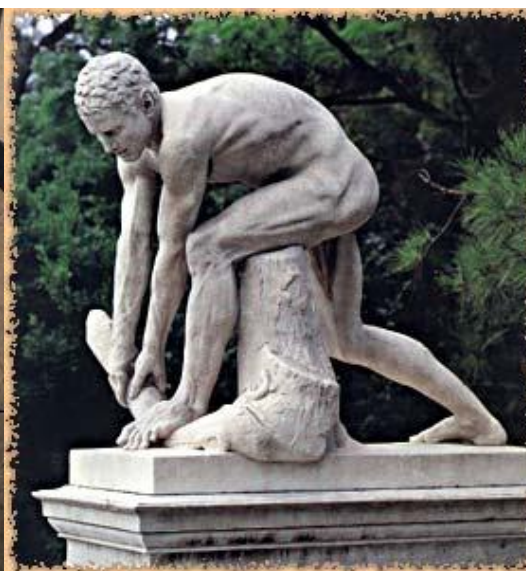
Now, a hold in music is by no means an empty space! And after many hours of experimentation, I can definitely tell that a vast pause cannot offer any significant input at this decisive point of the prelude. I prefer to prolong the a_b by an extra value of just two quavers, *without the slightest delay in tempo and pulsation*, at the rhythmic cost of the following figure of semi-quavers, which then shrinks its value to a quaver; or, alternatively, to prolong it by three extra quavers, again without any *ritenuto*, keeping the following semi-quavers in their proper value. I strongly believe that as interpreters, it is worth by all means supporting the organic intensity of such moments in this and many others preludes by Bach, instead of choosing a mild and contemplative way for their interpretation, which is always quite challenging, but nevertheless impedes to no purpose the flow of energy, which was, it seems to me, among Bach's uppermost concerns!

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Jorge Luis Borges



Wood chopper (D. Philippotes)



Discobolus (Myron)