

*People, Music, and Performance History*

# Frederick the Great: Flutist and Composer

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FREDERICK II, KNOWN AS FREDERICK THE GREAT, WAS THE ELDEST SURVIVING son of Frederick William I and Sophia Dorothea of Hanover, sister of George II of England. Born in Berlin in 1712, Frederick demonstrated an early interest and talent in music and French literature that created strife with his stern father. The “barracks King” did not appreciate the artistic leanings of his son. His instructions to Frederick’s tutors were that the Crown Prince should be trained for a hard life with its requisite distaste for laziness, “one of the greatest of all vices.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Crown Prince must deny himself “operas, comedies, and other follies of the laity.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore Frederick’s musical pursuits were accomplished with the aid of his mother and against the wishes of his father, who disapprovingly called his son “a flutist and a poet.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the period before his accession, Frederick developed his musical abilities. In 1728 he began studying flute with Johann Joachim Quantz and thus started a musical association that was to continue until Quantz’s death in 1773. At his residences in Ruppin and Rheinsberg he employed a group of musicians that was to form the nucleus of his musical establishment when he ascended the throne.

When Frederick became King in 1740, he expanded the group of musicians to fifty. They included C. P. E. Bach as first cembalist, Karl Heinrich Graun as Kapellmeister, Johann Fredrich Agricola as court composer, Franz and Joseph Benda as violinists, Johann Gottlieb Graun as concertmaster, and Johann Joachim Quantz as chamber musician and flutist. There were also chorus members, dancers, costumers, designers, and librettists for the Court Opera.<sup>4</sup> The new opera house opened in 1742, and two *opere serie* were produced each Carnival season. The King also maintained evening concerts at his residence, Sans-Souci, near Potsdam. The composer and soloist was always Quantz or the King. Usually the performing group was comprised of eight or nine

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Gaxotte, *Frederick the Great*, trans. R.A. Bell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Förster, *Friedrich Wilhelm I: König von Preussen*, 3 vols. (Potsdam, 1834), 1: 25, cited by Asprey, *Frederick the Great, the Magnificent Enigma* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1986), 21.

<sup>4</sup> *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, “Frederick II,” by Ernest Eugene Helm.

musicians, including the soloist, a keyboard player, a string quartet, double bass, and bassoonist.<sup>5</sup> Frederick was greatly involved in the activities of the musicians in his employment. He wrote the complete libretti for the operas *Montezuma* (1755) and *Silla* (1753), and for parts of *I fratelli nemici* (1756) and *Merope* (1756). As a composer, Frederick was active until the beginning of the Seven Years' War.<sup>6</sup>

After the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the musical life in Berlin was not revitalized. Nichelmann left Frederick's circle in 1756 and C. P. E. Bach left in 1767. From 1756 through 1764 no operas were staged, and after 1764 all productions were of previously written works. Frederick's own compositional work ceased as well, and as he aged, he lost his proficiency as a flute performer.<sup>7</sup> He died at Sans Souci in 1780.

The total output of Frederick is the following:

121 Sonatas for flute and cembalo

4 Concerti for flute and string orchestra

4 books of *Solfeggi* for flute (composed in collaboration with Quantz)

March in E♭

March, composed in Mollwitz, 1741

March, composed in 1756

Sinfonie in D major, composed in 1743 and used as an overture to a Serenata, 1747

2 arias in the above Serenata

3 arias in K. H. Graun's *Demofonte*, 1746

1 aria in K. H. Graun's *Il Guidizio di Paride*, 1752

1 aria in the pastorale, *Il trionfo della fedelta*, 1753 (in collaboration with Quantz and K. H. Graun)

An elaboration of an aria from Hasse's *Cleofide*

3 secular cantatas (lost)<sup>8</sup>

The general consensus among musicians of the King's day was that he played considerably better than a dilettante and possessed a fine technique and tone. Elisabeth Schmeling, a famous singer, declared of his playing, "He did not blow . . . like a King, but very well; he had a strong full sound and much virtuosity."<sup>9</sup> Frederick was especially eloquent in the adagio movements. Reichardt said, "The King delivered the Adagio with so much inner feelings

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Eugene Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1960), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick the Great, *Friedrichs des Grossens Musik Werk*, ed. with "Vorwort" by Phillip Spitta, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1889) reprint in 3 vols. (New York: Da Capo Press Reprint, 1967), 1: v-vi. Spitta's "Vorwort" was translated for the author by Karin Loewy.

<sup>7</sup> J.F. Reichardt, "Musikalische Anekdoten von Friedrich dem Grossen," *Musikalisches Kunstmagazin*, 2 (1791): 40, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Müller, *Friedrich der Grosse, seine Flöten und sein Flötenspiel* (Berlin: A. Parryhysius, 1932), 9.

and such moving simplicity and honesty that one rarely heard it without tears.”<sup>10</sup> Charles Burney was most enthusiastic in his praise of Frederick. Of a concert at Potsdam in 1772 Burney reported,

The concert began by a German flute concerto, in which his majesty executed the solo parts with great precision . . . I was much pleased, and even surprised with the neatness of his execution in the allegros, as well as by his expression and feeling in the adagio; in short, his performance surpassed, in many particulars, anything I had ever heard among Dilettanti, or even Professors. His majesty played three long and difficult concertos successively, and all with equal perfection . . .<sup>11</sup>

Criticism of the King's playing was concerned with breath control as he grew older and with nervousness which sometimes caused him to rush the faster passages. Charles Burney remarked in his notes concerning his trip to Potsdam in 1772,

The cadenzas which his majesty made were good, but very long and studied. It is easy to discover that these concertos were composed at a time when he did not so frequently require an opportunity of breathing as at present; for in some of the divisions, which were very long and difficult, as well as in the closes, he was obliged to take his breath, contrary to rule, before the passages were finished.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the Seven Years' War, Frederick was forced to stop playing. His breath control had weakened, several teeth were missing, and his gout had impaired his technique. In 1779 he remarked to Franz Benda, "My dear Benda, I have lost my best friend."<sup>13</sup> The decline of his performing ability coincided with a decline of interest in and enthusiasm for all music.<sup>14</sup> Before the weakening effect of old age Frederick must have been a good player, judging from the testimony of his peers and from the difficult passage work and long lines of his own works.

Quantz taught the King in a demanding manner. He, alone, was allowed to criticize Frederick and it was thought in the Court that the King actually feared his teacher. There was a joke in Potsdam, ascribed to C. P. E. Bach, concerning this pupil-teacher relationship:

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Burney, *Dr. Charles Burney's Continental Travels 1770-1772*, ed. Cedric Howard Glover (London: Blackie and Son, 1927), 229.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> J.F. Reichardt, "Musikalische Anekdoten," 40, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Question: Which is the most frightening beast in the world? Answer: The lapdog of Mrs. Quantz. It is so terrifying that it scares Mrs. Quantz; Mr. Quantz is afraid of her, and he himself is feared by the greatest monarch on this earth.<sup>15</sup>

Quantz, however, was often discreet in his treatment of his royal pupil. He sometimes would cough quietly to show his displeasure of the King's playing or cry "Bravo" to show his enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup> An anecdote by Franz Benda further illuminates the relationship. During a performance of one of the King's flute sonatas the melodic interval of a tritone was heard. Quantz cleared his throat and C. P. E. Bach repeated the tritone in the clavier. Later Frederick corrected the composition and said, "We must not aggravate Quantz's cough."<sup>17</sup>

Frederick maintained the same standard of discipline and organization in his musical routine as he did in his military and civil duties. Burney described the King's schedule:

His majesty's hour of rising is constantly at four o'clock in the morning during summer, and five in winter; and from that time till nine, when his ministers of different departments attend him, he is employed in reading letters, and answering them in the margin. He then drinks one dish of coffee, and proceeds to business with his ministers, who come full fraught with doubts, difficulties, documents, petitions and other papers to read . . . always retiring at ten o'clock [p.m.], after which, however, he frequently reads, writes, or composes music for his flute, before he goes to bed.<sup>18</sup>

The picture given by Burney was of a busy but organized monarch who managed to find time for his principal avocation, music.

Frederick practiced immediately in the morning, before or after the morning meeting of his advisors, after lunch, and before the evening concert.<sup>19</sup> Every day he diligently worked on the *Solfeggi*.<sup>20</sup> The practice routine was described by Reichardt:

The morning exercises are accomplished by reading through a long chart containing various kinds of scale passages. First he plays the natural scale

<sup>15</sup> Müller, *Friedrich der Grosse, seine Flöten und sein Flötenspiel*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Geiringer, *The Bach Family: Seven Generations of Creative Genius*, (London: Goerge Allen and Unwin, 1959), 339.

<sup>17</sup> Georg Thouret, *Friedrich der Grosse als Musikfreund und Musiker* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1898), 109, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Burney, *Dr. Charles Burney's Continental Travels*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> Reichardt, "Musikalische Anekdoten," 40, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> The *Solfeggi* were exercises composed by Frederick in collaboration with Quantz.

of d-e-f~~g~~-a-b-c~~d~~ and so forth, then d-f~~g~~, e-g, f~~g~~-a, g-b, a-c~~d~~, b-d, c~~d~~-e, etc., then d-e-f~~g~~-d, e-f~~g~~-e, f~~g~~-a-f~~g~~ and so forth, through all octaves; then all the exercises are played in descending motion; then all of the foregoing is repeated one half step higher . . . .<sup>21</sup>

Frederick warmed up before the evening concerts by playing the difficult passages and the *Solfeggi*. Burney describes the moments before a concert:

I was carried to one of the interior apartments of the palace, in which the gentlemen of the King's band were waiting for his commands. This apartment was contiguous to the concert-room, where I could distinctly hear his majesty practicing *Solfeggi* on the flute, and exercising himself in difficult passages previous to his calling in the band.<sup>22</sup>

The King's standard of discipline extended to the court musicians in his service. According to Burney, Frederick did not allow for alteration or variation of passages in the orchestral parts. Of his trip to Potsdam in 1772, Burney said of His Majesty,

In the opera-house as in the field, H. M. is such a rigid disciplinarian that, if a mistake is made in a single movement or evolution [section], he immediately remarks and rebukes the offender: and if any of his Italian troops dares to deviate from strict discipline by adding, altering or diminishing a single passage in the parts they have to perform, an order is sent 'de par le Roi' [from the King] for them to adhere strictly to the notes written by the composer at their peril.<sup>23</sup>

This last charge is hard to believe in its entirety because Quantz's famous treatise describing performance practice and including extensive ornamentation was written at Frederick's court. Perhaps the King was a stricter adherent to the written notes than his mentor, Quantz. In Frederick's own compositions ornaments were often notated in the melody as well as indicated by symbols.

Frederick played keyboard as well as the flute. He was an enthusiast of the pianoforte and owned at least three instruments made by Gottfried Silbermann. These early pianos were very refined. They did not make extraneous sounds, maintained their tuning, and allowed for a wide range of dynamics.<sup>24</sup> Frederick also owned several harpsichords including two Shudi models. Burney described the King's rooms: "In each of these apartments there is a room dedicated to music, furnished with books, desks, a harpsichord, and

<sup>21</sup> Erwin Schwarz-Reiflingen, "Friedrich der Grosse als Flötist," *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* 66 (1939): 478-79, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Burney, *Dr. Charles Burney's Continental Travels, 1700-1772*, 229.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 247-48.

with other instruments.”<sup>25</sup> Since Frederick was an early and avid supporter of the pianoforte, perhaps the flute line of his sonatas was sometimes accompanied by the pianoforte.

Georg Müller, in his pamphlet, *Friederich der Grosse, seine Flöten und sein Flötenspiele* (1932), described the surviving eight flutes played by the King. The flutes were found in the Hohenzollern Museum, in Montbijou Castle (Berlin), in the Schloss Sans Souci (Potsdam), in the State Instrument Collection of Berlin, and in the Heimat Museum (Potsdam). Two of the flutes are of ivory with one key and one is of amber with two golden keys: the enharmonic D $\sharp$  and E $\flat$  keys. Four flutes are of ebony with two silver keys. Finally there is one flute of boxwood, made by F. A. G. Kirst. Three of the wooden flutes have improvements by Quantz, whereas the amber flute is of an earlier period.<sup>26</sup>

Quantz was an important figure in Berlin not only as a performer and composer but also as an instrument builder. He made two lasting and important improvements in the construction of flutes. The first was the movable cork with attached screw. This mechanism enabled players to change and adjust the tuning to different locations without the changeable middle parts which were previously used. The second major improvement was the movable headpiece that gave even more flexibility of pitch. Quantz, in his autobiography, described this second innovation:

I was able to invent the sliding head joint of the flute, by means of which it is possible to change the pitch of the instrument by as much as a half step in either direction, without changing the middle joint and without sacrificing purity of tone or accuracy of intonation.<sup>27</sup>

The movable headpiece is still incorporated today for pitch adjustments. The movable cork with attached screw, although not used extensively for tuning anymore, is still incorporated for register adjustment and ease of response.

Another change in the flute mechanism made by Quantz did not withstand the test of time. This was the addition of a closed key and hole next to the E $\flat$ , the enharmonic D $\sharp$ . It enabled the flutist to play in tune in more keys. With Boehm's improvements in flute construction in the nineteenth century, Quantz's invention was no longer necessary.

Quantz's flutes were known as "Berliner Flöte" and possessed a characteristic full tone due to the increased bore.<sup>28</sup> All of the flutes of the eighteenth century had conical bores and produced a sweet tone capable of delicate nu-

<sup>25</sup> Burney, *Dr. Charles Burney's Continental Travels*, 227.

<sup>26</sup> Müller, *Friedrich der Grosse, seine Flöten und sein Flötenspiele*, 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Johann Joachim Quantz, "Herrn Joachim Quantzens Lebenslauf," *Historisch-Kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*, 5 Vols. (Berlin: G.A. Lange, 1754-1778), ed. F.W. Marburg, 1: 249, cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> Schwarz-Rerflingen, "Friedrich der Grosse als Flötist," cited by Helm, *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 163.

ance and articulation. The cylindrical-bore instruments of today have tones that are more resonant and full but less capable of subtle nuance.

The King had an eclectic attitude towards his flutes, as illustrated in the three following quotations. First, the King used several flutes of different tonal character interchangeably, depending upon the character of the music. In 1745 Frederick wrote to his servant Fredersdorf,

Quantz is to make me two new flutes—but very special ones—one with a strong tone that is easily blown and one with a sweet high register, and he is to keep them until my return.<sup>29</sup>

Second, Frederick also helped Quantz, his chief instrument-builder, locate possible materials. Quantz reported that “a trunk of ebony, which the King had received from Portugal in 1766 and had presented to him as a gift, was the best that he had ever had.”<sup>30</sup> Third, an argument between Quantz and Frederick involved one of Quantz’s flutes and the King’s perception of the instrument. Frederick claimed that it was poorly made because of the faulty intonation. Quantz blamed the problem on the King’s careless manner of holding the flute. Frederick finally decided that his teacher was correct. He said,

My dear Quantz, I have experimented with the flute in various ways for eight days, and have come to the conclusion that you are right. I will no longer let the flute become warm in my hand.<sup>31</sup>

Frederick had great respect for Quantz’s abilities as an instrument maker. The King did own, however, flutes constructed by other craftsmen, including a surviving flute made by Scherer in Paris and found at the State Instrument Collection of Berlin.

After the Seven Years’ War Frederick returned to Potsdam with a rigid musical taste and style. Burney wrote an opinionated commentary on the music of Frederick’s court in the later years of his reign, concluding that the musical style in Berlin had not continued to develop:

M. Quantz is an intelligent man, and talks well concerning music; but talking and composing are different things; when he wrote his book more than twenty years ago, his opinions were enlarged and liberal, which is not the case at present; . . . but though the world is ever rolling on, most of the Berlin musicians, defeating its motion, have long contrived to stand still . . . Of his majesty’s two favorites [Graun and Quantz], the one is languid, and the other frequently common and insipid—and

<sup>29</sup> Edward R. Reilly, *Quantz and his Versuch*, American Musicological Society (N.Y.: Galaxy Music Corp., 1971), 102.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Thouret, *Friedrich der Grosse als Musikfreund und Musiker*, 109-10, cited by Helm. *Music at the Court of Frederick the Great*, 160.

yet, their names are religion at Berlin and more sworn by than those of Luther and Calvin.<sup>32</sup>

Burney's account described Frederick's loss of vitality as a patron in his later years. The King's compositional work and performance activities had ceased as well after the strain of the Seven Years' War. The loss of creative energy contrasted strongly with the organization and musical drive which had characterized the King's accession to the throne. Throughout his reign, Frederick was devoted to his mentor, Johann Joachim Quantz. As a composer, a flutist, and an instrument builder, Quantz was the most important influence on the King's musical development and career.

Frederick's relationship to C. P. E. Bach, his accompanist, was troubled in comparison to the devotion and respect that the King showed his mentor, Quantz. C. P. E. Bach never earned the high salary or enjoyed the prestige at court accorded to Quantz. Quantz earned 2000 thalers per year, an honorarium for each new work, and one hundred ducats for each new flute that he constructed. In contrast, Bach earned only 300 thalers upon being hired in 1740. In 1756, his salary was increased to 500 thalers and it was increased again later as an incentive to stay in Berlin. It never approached Quantz's allotment, however.

Geiringer attributed C. P. E. Bach's notable lack of success with Frederick to a problem of personality.<sup>33</sup> Bach was not able to feign the devotion and enthusiasm in the King's musical affairs that was expected. In fact, he was often caustic in his remarks to the King. For example, when a guest at one of the evening concerts at Sans-Souci complimented Frederick's performance, saying "what rhythm," Bach sarcastically replied, "what rhythms!"<sup>34</sup> Bach was implying that the King did not keep a steady tempo and tended to rush the faster passages. In addition, Frederick did not show appreciation for Bach's flute compositions which were dramatic and emotional in comparison to those of Quantz and the King. Bach's works were not included in the regular programs at either Sans-Souci or Berlin.

Frederick's lack of appreciation of the progressive nature of C. P. E. Bach's works underscored the rigidity of musical style in Berlin after the Seven Years' War. The main body of Frederick's work, the 121 sonatas, demonstrate that the King's musical taste was limited to the *style galant*, as exemplified by Quantz. The sonatas by Frederick the Great do illustrate, however, several fascinating aspects concerning formal plan. There are many of the balanced binary fast movements that recapitulate both first and second themes in tonic in the second half, foreshadowing the "sonata allegro" of the Classical period.<sup>35</sup> Also

<sup>32</sup> Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Provinces* (London, 1775), ed. Percy A. Scholes, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe*, in 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), as *An Eighteenth-Century Musical Tour in Central Europe and the Netherlands*, 2: 206-207.

<sup>33</sup> Geiringer, *The Bach Family*, 339-41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>35</sup> For an example, refer to the second movement, "Allegro," of Sonata I.

interesting are a few fast movements that combine the thematic arrangement of the rondo form with the key scheme of the typical binary form.<sup>36</sup> Most of the slow movements are either in an atypical tripartite form in which melodic and tonal ideas do not coincide, or in the standard continuous binary form. Especially noteworthy, however, are the slow movements whose formal plan is based upon features such as striking melodic contrast or continuous variation. The "Recitative" of Sonata 84, which alternates *recitative* and *arioso* sections, resembles the more dramatic *empfindsamer Stil* of C. P. E. Bach and may have been the King's attempt to break away from the usual form.

The manuscript copy of the Presto of Sonata 112 (255) IV illustrates the more conservative compositional tendencies of the King. Only five of the fifty fast movements of the Spitta edition are monothematic. This Presto is monothematic and shows traits of spinning out with few strong divisional cadences or rests. As is typical of the fast movements of Frederick's sonatas, the movement is in balanced binary form. At the close of the second half there is a restatement in tonic of the concluding material (ordinarily referred to as closing material) of the first half. In the case of this monothematic movement, the concluding material (the last seven measures of each half) is derived from the ascending and descending scale motives of the opening. The opening material is also restated at the beginning of the second half in the dominant key, and at the return of the tonic key in m. 55. These areas of restatement of the opening material are typical of Frederick's fast movements even though most of the fast movements are not monothematic, but instead have two or three clearly-delineated themes.

Frederick's flute sonatas are musically engaging. Along with the sonatas of Quantz and C. P. E. Bach, they represent the spirit of experimentation in the North German school preceding the Classical sonatas of Haydn and Mozart.

<sup>36</sup> Refer to the third movement, "Presto," of Sonata I.