

## Web Feature 17.1

### Tonality as a journey

The idea of key relationships in music as “distances” to be traveled goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century; in 1702 the composer J. K. F. Fischer published a collection of pieces in nineteen different keys (plus the Phrygian mode) entitled *Ariadne musica*. The work’s title is a reference to Ariadne’s ball of thread that guided Theseus through the labyrinth in Greek mythology; thus, this was a set of pieces that systematically and collectively explored the relationships among the different keys and “guided” the performer among them. Similarly, J. S. Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788) described in his influential book, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1762), how a performer might negotiate a dramatic path among keys that had different perceived “distances” from one another: “in a free fantasia modulation may be made to closely related, remote, and all other keys.”<sup>1</sup> He also points out: “It is one of the beauties of improvisation to feign modulation to a new key through a formal cadence and then move off in another direction. This and other rational deceptions make a fantasia attractive.”<sup>2</sup>

All the same, he cautions the performer to use restraint in structuring the improvisation in a manner that would befit a narrative, not veering off into the “adventure” at the beginning or returning “home” at the end too early:

When only little time is available for the display of craftsmanship, the performer should not wander into too remote keys, for the performance must soon come to an end. Moreover, the principal key must not be left too quickly at the beginning nor regained too late at the end. At the start the principal key must prevail for some time so that the listener will be unmistakably oriented. And again before the close it must be well prolonged as a means of preparing the listener for the end of the fantasia and impressing the tonality upon his memory.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, translated and edited by William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), p. 434.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 431.

The art of modulation was an integral part of improvising “free” keyboard fantasias and preludes in the Baroque and early Classic eras. See Web Feature 18.1 for a composed example of this type of improvisatory practice.