

## ORYX 504-5 - *The BACHOPHILE Album*

**Johann Sebastian Bach** was born on March 21st 1685, the son of Johann Ambrosius, Court Trumpeter for the Duke of Eisenach and director of the musicians of the town of Eisenach in Thuringia where members of the Bach family had long held positions such as Organists, Town Instrumentalists, or Cantors, and the family name enjoyed a wide reputation for musical talent. When he was only nine years old his parents died, and Johann Sebastian was taken in by his eldest brother, Johann Christoph, who was well established as Organist of the St. Michaeliskirche, Ohrdruf. Johann Christoph was an excellent teacher and a keen student of the latest keyboard compositions. In the Spring of 1700 Johann Sebastian was sent north to Lüneburg to study and sing in the St. Michaeliskirche Choir. Here he was introduced to the great organ traditions of Hamburg, to which city he made several pilgrimages on foot. In 1702, hearing of an organ under construction in the new church of Arnstadt, he returned south. In July 1703 the Arnstadt Town Council invited young Bach to try out the newly finished organ. He so impressed the people of Arnstadt with his brilliant playing at the dedication that he was immediately offered the post of organist on very favorable terms. Some of his earliest organ works date from this period.

Ever ambitious to advance his musical career, in 1708, Bach accepted a post offered him by the Duke of Weimar among his Court chamber musicians. In Weimar, Bach's two-fold position as member of the chamber orchestra and as Organist to the Court offered him many opportunities for improvement. As Court Organist, Bach wrote profusely for the organ, and he was rapidly becoming known throughout the country as one of the greatest German organists. Organ pupils came to him from far and wide, and he was asked to test or dedicate many organs in various towns. His tests were extremely thorough and critical. He used to say for fun 'Above all I must know whether the organ has a good lung', and, pulling out all the stops he produced the largest sound possible, often making the organ builders go pale with fright. He would usually complete his trial by improvising a prelude and fugue: the prelude to test the organ's power, the fugue to test its clarity for counterpoint. Many of Bach's organ works were composed as test pieces, and it is thus important in performance for the player to emulate Bach, and use the piece to demonstrate the organ's variety and capabilities. Bach's cousin, Walther, was also in Weimar, and the two experimented in converting Orchestral Concertos for Solo Harpsichord or Organ. The Concerto after Vivaldi on *Disc 1, Track 13* is an example.

In 1717 Bach moved to the Ducal Court at Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque Age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, barely twenty-five years old. Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the "Grand Tour of Europe", first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy, returning by way of Vienna. So he would have been thoroughly familiar with the latest European fashions in music. The young Prince stretched the limited budget of his miniature Court to provide an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin. Life at Cöthen was informal and easy-going; in this happy atmosphere Bach's days were completely devoted to music. During this period he wrote much of his Chamber Music; Violin Concertos, Sonatas, and Keyboard Music.

In 1722 the death of Johann Kuhnau, Cantor of the Thomasschule at Leipzig opened the possibility of an appointment for Bach at Leipzig, a cosmopolitan city situated in familiar territory where Bach already had many musical and courtly connections; in addition it had a famous university, and the three-times-yearly Trade Fair gave the city a distinctly cosmopolitan atmosphere. This position of Cantor at Leipzig had been favorably described to Bach, and as the town offered the necessary educational facilities for his sons, he applied and was accepted for the post. And so Bach moved to Leipzig on May 22, 1723, where for the remaining 27 years of his life he was to live and work as Cantor, or *Directore Chori Musici Lipsiensis* - Director of Choir and Music in Leipzig. Cantata 76 and the Magnificat in D Major are examples of his earliest offerings for the Leipzig congregations. During the period 1723 to 1730, Bach managed to produce three cycles of Cantatas covering the full requirements of the Leipzig Liturgical Year.

As we move into the 1730s, we find Bach well established in his position at Leipzig, and widely respected as a composer, musician, teacher, organist, and specialist in organ construction. This respect was to grow steadily, as Bach's reputation widened, and as he gained the official title of Court Composer to the Dresden Court - the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. This comfortable security of position combined with the fact that Bach had established, during his first six or seven years' tenure, a more than sufficient repertoire of Cantatas (it has been suggested that he composed in total 300, out of which some 200 have survived), allowed him to widen his musical scope of activity.

Bach would now begin to devote more time to activities outside Leipzig; to examine for musical appointments, to advise on organ building, to lend support from time to time to such private establishments as at Cöthen and Weissenfels, where he was honorary Capellmeister from 1729-1736. In particular, Bach had become famous, not only as an organist and improvisator, but as an expert in organ construction. As a result he was frequently asked to advise on new organ specifications and to test newly completed instruments with a thorough and detailed examination and report, as was the custom of the time. Bach developed a close working relationship with his contemporary, the celebrated Saxon organ-builder Gottfried Silbermann, who was also a personal friend of the Bach family and godfather to Carl Philipp Emanuel. Bach may well have played any number of Silbermann's instruments, almost all of which were located in Saxony. In 1733 Bach petitioned the Elector of Saxony in Dresden for an official title, enclosing copies of the Kyrie and Gloria from the B-minor Mass; though unsuccessful, Bach tried again this time with the backing of his Dresden patron Count von Keyserlingk. Thereafter he received the title, and signed himself as Dresden *Hofcompositeur*. By way of acknowledgment Bach presented a two-hour recital on the new Silbermann organ in the Frauenkirche (tragically destroyed in the Second World War).

In Bach's time, the city of Leipzig already had an established tradition of Collegia Musica - secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed university - dating back at least to the middle of the preceding century, if not its beginning. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. In the spring of 1729, the Directorship of one such *Collegium* became vacant, and Bach took it over. The story of Bach's *Collegium Musicum* is closely bound to a Leipzig coffeeshop-proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann. The concerts were given on Zimmermann's premises, probably under his auspices, and in his Coffee Garden "in front of the Grimma gate, on the Grimma stone road". That Gottfried Zimmermann was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a competent musician, is indicated by the fact, as confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was "a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity" which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by an "even finer instrument" in 1733.

German harpsichords were larger and fuller in tone than their Italian and French contemporaries, offering a much wider range of sound. The new instrument would certainly have had two, possibly three manuals, and may have been the work of the famous Hamburg builder Hass similar to his 1740 instrument with three manuals and five choirs of strings (2', 4', 8', 8' and 16'). There may well have been a separate organ-type pedalboard.

Bach's Concertos for 1, 2, 3 and 4 Harpsichords & Orchestra would have been given at these concerts, together with chamber works and music for solo harpsichord. In addition to Bach's own compositions, works by Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were performed. With the *Collegium* Bach satisfied a side of himself that certainly must have lain dormant since the happy and fruitful period at Cöthen. He remained its director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741. Bach also enjoyed visits, often with his son Wilhelm Friedemann, to Dresden, where he would meet with friends in the Court Orchestra and perhaps visit the Opera. On one occasion he called upon his patron Count von Keyserlingk, whom he presented with the set of variations now known as the *Goldberg Variations* after the Count's personal harpsichordist.

During the latter years of his life Bach was able to relax, enjoying his varied musical activities undertaken now more for pleasure and under much less pressure. In his own much improved apartments of the newly rebuilt Thomasschule Bach would welcome visiting musicians from all over Germany and many other countries. His son Carl-Phillip Emanuel was to write that "no musician of any consequence passing through Leipzig would fail to call upon my father". No doubt they and some of his sons would enjoy a private concert in Bach's large music-room.

In these last years of his life, Bach's creative energy was conserved for the highest flights of musical expression: the Mass in b minor, the Canonic Variations, the Goldberg Variations, and of course the Musical Offering displaying the Art of Canon. His last great work is the complete summary of all his skill in counterpoint and fugue; methods which he perfected, and beyond which no composer has ever been able to pass. This work is known to us as 'Die Kunst der Fuge' ('The Art of the Fugue', BWV 1080). He was also working on another great fugue at this time though it was to remain unfinished and is customarily appended to the *Art of the Fugue*. It is this unfinished Fugue which concludes our second disc.