

## BACH 726 - J.S. BACH: *Harpsichord* Toccatas

There were several formats known to Baroque music. The Cantata, from Latin *cantare* = to sing, was of course a choral piece. The Sonata (Latin *sonare* = to sound) was a chamber instrumental piece. The concerto was a “concerted” composition played by a group of musicians, alternating with a soloist. In all of these cases, history has clearly established through much documentation, that tempi were strictly maintained. Conductors would beat time on their desks or lecterns with rolled-up manuscript, or for larger groups, would often rap out the time on the floor with a long staff.

In complete contrast, the *Toccata*, from the Latin *toccare* = to touch, was specifically a solo keyboard showpiece in which the solo player, being unfettered by the need to keep time with others, was permitted, indeed positively invited and expected to display individuality in interpretation, and to perform with fire and panache.

Generally written for organ or harpsichord, the *Toccata* challenges the touch and execution of the performer in the imaginative interlacing of running passages and full chords with sections in imitative style (fugues). The term *Toccata* with this specific connotation was used since the early 1600s. Being improvisatory by nature, the *Toccata* never acquired a rigid form. Thus *Adagio* and *Presto* alternate with *Fugal* episodes or florid fantasy passages.

Among the works that Johann Sebastian Bach wrote for keyboard instruments in his early years, the Seven Clavier Toccatas BWV 910 to 916, of which six are recorded here, hold a prominent place, demonstrating this improvisatory freedom to an extent unparalleled in his own works and indeed in those of his contemporaries with the possible exception of Buxtehude’s *Organ Works*.

Composed in Cöthen and Weimar (1710 and 1720) Bach's Toccatas are generally in four sections. A bright rapid *fugal* section, usually on two subjects, follows a slow section introduced by running passages; then an *adagio* developing lyrical motifs, and finally another *fugal allegro*, generally on two subjects. But Bach occasionally varies this form. Thus in the D Major *Toccata* BWV 912, the middle *adagio* is in three sections with a *fugal* middle section. Only a few intermediate bars separate the *fugues* of the C minor *Toccata*, BWV 911.

There are no extant copies of the Toccatas in Bach's handwriting but there are many that were made by his pupils. None of these, however, comprises all seven Toccatas, and they differ in many respects one from another. Whether these variants are mistakes or arbitrary alterations by the copyists, or whether they are corrections deriving from Bach himself, it is not always possible to say with certainty. For this reason comparative study of the sources presents problems that can hardly ever be satisfactorily solved. The endeavor, through detailed comparison, to find the best source and then reproduce it as faithfully as possible is difficult to achieve where authentic sources are all too scanty or largely a matter of chance.

In such cases one must therefore try to establish from various sources and with the aid of conjecture a text that presumably comes closest to Bach's intentions. Isolde Ahlgrimm has edited her own scores for these works, which she performs, according to her custom, entirely from memory.

Documentation for the existence of domestic pedal instruments dates back nearly as far as that for organ pedals. We have evidence for organ pedals from the early 14th century, and in the 15th century we find mention of the pedal-clavichord. In about 1460 Paulinirus of Prague writes: "*The clavichord . . . with its pedal board affords a useful introduction to the organ...*".

We know that from the Middle Ages onwards organists always found great difficulty in arranging “pumpers” for practice – especially winter practice in unheated churches! The increasing use of the pedal part in German and Flemish organ music naturally encouraged the addition of pedals to domestic practice instruments. Perhaps the greatest number of domestic pedal instruments was to be found in 18th century Germany. J.S. Bach gave to his youngest son three keyboard instruments with pedal boards – without however making it clear whether these were pedal-harpsichords or pedal-clavichords. As practice instruments, it is not surprising that they were found largely in the possession of organists, and, once more conforming with German organ building of the time, it seems that they were expected to include the 16' register. Isolde Ahlgrimm quickly became convinced of the need for an organ-type pedalboard, not only for organ practice, but to achieve many of the longer hand spans demanded by

Bach, and to add bass emphasis whenever the music so demanded.

Vienna-born **Isolde Ahlgrimm** received her first piano lessons at the age of four from her mother, an accomplished pianist whose musicality was once rewarded with a kiss from Brahms! At the age of seven she entered the Vienna Music Academy and obtained her diploma in 1932. She quickly adopted Baroque music, and the Harpsichord as her specialty, further encouraged by her friendship with and later marriage to Dr Erich Fiala who owned a spectacular collection of Amati violins – these would later be featured within the Amati Orchestra, which performed among other works, the complete Keyboard Concertos of J.S. Bach, conducted by Erich Fiala with Isolde Ahlgrimm taking the solos on her Ammer Harpsichord.

The couple gave over a hundred performances of Baroque and Rococo music in Vienna, and as soloist, Isolde Ahlgrimm performed the complete Clavier Works of Bach on her Ammer Pedal-harpsichord and the complete Piano Works of Mozart on a 1787 “Hammerklavier”, performing both cycles entirely from memory, as was her custom. Her only acknowledgment to the modern piano was in the performance of the Chamber Works by Richard Strauss, who was himself very fond of her and dedicated to her one of his most beautiful works, the “*Capriccio Suite for Cembalo*”.

The combination of Isolde Ahlgrimm’s uniquely virtuosic, almost improvisational style of playing with her Ammer Pedal-harpsichord brings these Toccatas stunningly to life in a way which no other performer has yet to our knowledge achieved. The Toccatas demand a performance with drive and panache, a demand more than amply fulfilled in these electrifying performances.