

BACH 727 - BACH on the PEDAL-HARPSICHORD

A Pedal-harpsichord, that is, a harpsichord with an organ-type pedal-board as illustrated on our front cover, would have been found in the home of most German organists during the Baroque period. Organ practice in churches was difficult; some willing collaborator had to be found, and paid, to pump the organ, and the church could be very cold in winter. Additionally, several contemporary organists whom we have recorded on the pedal-harpsichord have assured us that practice on the pedal-harpsichord is infinitely more demanding in terms of accuracy and precision than on the organ, which provides yet another reason for employing the pedal-harpsichord as a practice instrument. A two-manual harpsichord with pedal-board in the home would afford opportunity for organ practice, as well as having the two manuals for more substantial keyboard-only pieces such as Bach's Goldberg Variations and the Italian Concerto, both of which require the contrast provided by two manuals. Pedals could also be brought in to reinforce manual-only compositions where necessary, either to add bass, or to assist with a long hand-span.

The prevalence of the Pedal-harpsichord in German homes, as opposed say to Italian or French, can be accounted for in part by two factors. First, the Protestant church services, unlike the Catholic, make extensive use of hymns, or chorales, sung by the whole congregation, where a strong pedal accompaniment from the organ is essential to support the harmonic structure – and keep the congregation moving! Second, German Baroque music is much more contrapuntal than its Italian and French counterparts; fugues, canons, and especially variations-on-a-bass-line, benefit from the availability of a pedal part providing an additional independent voice. This is borne out clearly in the second piece on our program: Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in c minor.

The three forms basic to Baroque music were the *Canon*, the *Fugue*, and the *Chaconne/Passacaglia/Variations* group. The Canon and the Fugue are constructed by creating patterns with a melodic line; in the case of the Canon, the melody is repeated as a "round", moving progressively from the soprano, down through the alto, tenor and bass lines. In a Fugue, the melody appears anywhere, not in any strict order.

With the Chaconne/Passacaglia/Variations group, musical patterns are created with a tune or bass line, and its implied harmonies. The Goldberg Variations is one of the finest examples of "Air with Variations"; additionally there are numerous examples of Baroque compositions featuring variations on Chorale melodies. In a Passacaglia, the melody is generally featured as a repeating bassline, though it can appear in any voice. In his **Passacaglia & Fugue in c minor**, Bach shows us clearly the two forms, of Passacaglia, and Fugue side by side in a piece of music which has rarely been excelled in contrapuntal and musical power. The bass motif is stated at the outset. Throughout the variations which follow it remains clearly discernible, either in the pedal, or on the manuals. When all the possibilities of variation on the bass line have been exhausted, Bach repeats the theme with an added counter-theme, and proceeds to create one of his most magnificent fugues. This work is not only a musical masterpiece, it is also a master-lesson for those who seek a clear and easy-to-follow initiation into these two important main forms of Baroque musical pattern. We would also add that in this particular rendition by Nicholas Danby on the pedal-harpsichord, the inherent clarity of the instrument, the interpretation, choice of registration and steady tempo make this one of the clearest, most transparent performances of this great work we have yet encountered.

The Six Trio Sonatas were written by Bach for his son Wilhelm Friedemann, to develop his pedal technique and accustom him to three-part writing. In this, the Trio Sonata IV in e minor BWV 528, a brief Adagio leads straight into the Vivace, the first movement proper. The Vivace is very much three-part writing, the pedal sharing the melodic writing equally with the manuals. In the following Andante however, we find more of a duet between the hands, with the pedal providing a supporting bass. In the stately last movement, '*U n poco Allegro*', the pedal once again has a share in the melodic material. All three movements are extremely melodic, and the tunes soon become enjoyably familiar. One might think that Wilhelm Friedemann must have had some very enjoyable lessons - but do not be deceived! These Trio Sonatas are immensely difficult to play; Wilhelm Friedemann must have reached a considerable degree of proficiency to succeed in playing these works at all, particularly on the pedal-harpsichord, which requires much greater accuracy than the organ. This Trio Sonata re-appears as the Sinfonia which opens the second part (following the Sermon) of the wonderful Cantata 76 *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes* (BACH 723 in the ORYX Bach Music Collection).

Our first track, **Prelude in c minor, BWV 548**, is an Organ piece – here we can imagine an organist practicing on his domestic pedal-harpsichord! The two following tracks, the **Passacaglia & Fugue, BWV 582** and **Trio Sonata No. IV in e minor, BWV 528**, were intended for Organ or Pedal-Harpsichord, as were the three **Fugues BWV 575, 576 and 577**, all of which are regarded as early works dating from Bach's Arnstadt period. The catchy melody and lilting rhythm of the last of the three has become understandably popular in arrangements for orchestra or brass group, known as the "Jig Fugue".

The remaining items in our program may be regarded as pure Harpsichord works, that is, intended for manuals only, though the stately **Fantasy & Fugue in a minor, BWV 904** lends itself perfectly to the greater power and sustaining capability of the organ, and assuredly benefits from the additional reinforcement from the pedal. The bright and highly virtuosic **Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue in d minor BWV 903** is a magnificent piece of improvisational writing, as much admired by Bach's contemporaries as it is by performers and listeners today. Like the Harpsichord Toccatas (performed by Isolde Ahlgrimm on BACH 726 in the *Bach Music Collection*), the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue is a virtuosic piece demanding an individualistic, personal interpretation by each performer (compare for example, George Malcolm's performance on BACH 717).

Much shorter though no less dazzling is the **Fantasy in c minor BWV 906**, a Leipzig composition of which Bach made two fair copies. Its accompanying fugue is incomplete. During the 1730s in Leipzig, when Bach was providing music of all kinds, by himself and others, for the regular weekly performances of the Collegium Musicum, the harpsichord featured prominently, both in Bach's daring (for that time) elevation of the harpsichord to solo position in an orchestrated Concerto, and in the keyboard solos with which he always managed to keep ahead of keyboard "competitors" such as Scarlatti and Handel.

It has become fashionable in recent years to define the lightly-framed, preferably single-manual harpsichord giving forth a thin, resonant sound as "authentic". While such an instrument may be suitable for early Italian music, and less so for Flemish and French music, it bears little resemblance to the much more solid, larger and more richly-toned instruments which would have been found in baroque Germany. And two manuals at least would have been essential to practice "terrace dynamics", a technique considered vital to display the architecture of contrapuntal music.

In addition, the German preference seems to have been for a more full-bodied instrumental sound. A painting showing the Jena Collegium Musicum giving an outdoor concert, painted in 1744, clearly shows a three-manual harpsichord. A 16-foot stop was normal (Bach's main harpsichord had one) and as already noted, a separate pedal-board would be placed under the harpsichord. The German harpsichord thus resembled a small organ, and was far removed from the light, single-manual instrument more typical of Baroque Italy.

During Bach's later Leipzig years the Collegium Musicum which he directed gave its regular concerts in Zimmermann's Coffee House. Gottfried Zimmermann was himself a music-lover and quite probably a competent musician. As confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, 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 clavcymbel of large size and range of expressivity" which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by "an even finer instrument" in 1733.

As for the sound itself, the typical Baroque German harpsichord would certainly have sounded rounder and richer, without the "jangle" often associated with "authentic" instruments; but even this sound did not exactly match Bach's personal taste, as evidenced by his long-time wish to own a harpsichord with the soft sound of the lute. He eventually had two such "Lute-Harpsichords" custom-built for his own use in his home.

On this disc we hear two instruments. The first, recorded in England by Oryx in the Oryx Sound Studios, Walton on Thames, Surrey, is a pedal-harpsichord by the Sevenoaks, Kent firm of **John Feldberg** on which **Nicholas Danby** plays the Prelude in e ("The Wedge"), the Passacaglia & Fugue and the Trio Sonata. This instrument has two manuals, with an 8-foot and 4-foot stop on each, and a 16-foot on the lower manual. The pedal section has its own 4-, 8- and 16-foot sets.

Isolde Ahlgrimm plays her own **Ammer** pedal-harpsichord, recorded here in her Vienna home, an instrument with similar manual and pedal specification. It is our firm contention, for which we believe there is substantial historical evidence, that the instruments recorded on this disc resemble far more closely those which Bach would have used, than the lighter, thinner sonorities of those currently dubbed as "authentic".