

BACH 745 - J.S. BACH: Flute & Harpsichord Sonatas & French Overture for Harpsichord

The Harpsichord in our day is indeed a much-maligned instrument. Thin-sounding, single-manual instruments are claimed as “authentic” for the performance of Bach’s clavier music, while the overwhelming evidence shows that German harpsichords of Bach’s time were substantial, full-bodied instruments having at least two, possibly three or even four manuals, with 16’, 8’, 4’ and probably 2’ stops and buff lute effects.

But no matter, for the harpsichord is only a continuo instrument, used to provide base harmony and a beat – to be felt but not heard. For genuine continuo use this may be fine; but the “inaudible harpsichord” makes its ghostly presence felt not only in continuo use, but in Concertos for Harpsichord and Orchestra, in which the harpsichord, like the piano in a Mozart Piano Concerto, is the star performer; here it is the orchestra, rather than the harpsichord, which should play the part of the “continuo” in the sense of harmonic backing.

Similarly with Bach’s Sonatas for Flute or Violin and Clavier. There are indeed Sonatas for Flute and Continuo, very properly played with the flute given prominence and the harpsichord taking a background role in the company of a cello. But Bach also composed sonatas specifically for “Flute and Clavier” and it is quite clear from the music itself that Bach was thinking in terms of a Trio Sonata of three equal parts: a part for the keyboard’s left hand, a part for the keyboard’s right hand, and a part for the flute. How rarely is this respected, either in recording or live performance.

In the Flute and Clavier Sonatas heard on this present disc, all four of which were composed expressly for three equal melodic lines, an equal balance and prominence is given to keyboard and flute, thus the full effect of a true Trio Sonata can be enjoyed, as fugal themes and melodic phrases are passed to-and-fro from one part to another.

On December 2nd, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-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, at barely 25 a relative youngster like Bach. The Prince was a Calvinist, and as the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendours of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen. However, the young Prince enjoyed a cheerful and cultivated lifestyle complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions.

Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the Grand Tour of Europe, first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy where he studied Italian secular music with great interest; returning by way of Vienna. He had well-developed musical tastes, and he returned from his Grand Tour determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level, to which end he 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. In fact it was during the Prince’s Grand Tour in 1713 that news came to him of a golden opportunity: when Wilhelm I of Prussia came to power, he dismissed his father’s Court Capelle, and Prince Leopold was able to tempt many of the best musicians from Berlin to Cöthen.

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, flute, violin, and trio sonatas, keyboard music, the Sonatas and Partitas for unaccompanied Violin, the Suites for unaccompanied Violoncello, the Six Brandenburg Concertos, and probably the Orchestral Suites.

In December, 1721, however, the Prince married. And for Bach this was to be an unfortunate event, as the new Princess disapproved of and actively discouraged her husband's musical activities. Thus it was that just over a year later Bach took up a new position as Cantor of St Thomas’ Church, Leipzig.

At the beginning of the 18th century Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state, with Leipzig as its economic capital. The city's tri-annual Fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life.

During Bach's early Leipzig years, one could say the 1720s, his main concern was with his long-stated ambition of providing "*a well-regulated Church Music*" which in practice required Cantatas covering the whole liturgical year. This completed, in the 1730s his interests widened to include secular and educational projects, a major undertaking of which was the four semi-educational groups of works known under the general heading of Clavierübung or Keyboard Exercise prepared and published successively during the 1730s and 40s. Having completed his Forty-eight Preludes & Fugues Bach set about creating a series of works demonstrating the whole range of Keyboard Art, published eventually as four volumes of the Clavierübung.

Part I contains the Six Keyboard Partitas (*available on BACH 704-5*).

Part II contrasted two national styles: the French Overture on this present disc, and the Italian Concerto (*see BACH 716*). Part III consisted of Chorale Preludes for the organ, with the monumental Prelude & Fugue BWV 552. Part IV presented the famous Goldberg Variations (*see BACH 731 & BHP 901*). This second volume was published by Christoph Weigel Jr., Nuremberg in 1735.

A major source of musical entertainment in Bach's Leipzig was provided by the Collegia Musica - secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed University. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (including several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. Bach took over the direction of a Collegium in 1729 giving concerts in Zimmermann's Coffee House on the fashionable Catherine Strasse.

The Collegium's concerts offered a varied selection of works. Vocal music might be given, such as the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211, first presented in 1732. It is also on record that works of Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were also performed here in addition of course, to Bach's own compositions. Gottfried Zimmerman was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and most probably a competent musician; 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 made it a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by an even finer instrument in 1733. Thus harpsichord music would no doubt take prominence.

The need for instrumental pieces provided Bach with the opportunity to revive much of his Cöthen and Weimar work, including the Sonatas on this disc. On these occasions too Bach's Concerti for one or several harpsichords received their performances, many of these having been adapted from earlier (*eg. violin*) concertos, or from concertos by other composers (*eg. Vivaldi*). It is quite likely that works from the Clavierübung series would also be included; thus all of the works on this disc might have been enjoyed by Zimmermann's Leipzig clientele.

These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular Coffee Shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual diversions offered there. The performances of the Collegium were, in fact, hardly different from what we consider to be normal concert procedure today. Indeed, the word "Concert" began to be used expressly in connection with the Collegium during its later years. The Collegium Musicum was no mere diversion for Bach. The fact is that this was, for much of his later life, his central artistic activity, the church becoming almost peripheral. In his years 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.