

BACH 759 - J.S. BACH: The Six TRIO SONATAS on the Pedal Harpsichord

The Trio Sonata is very much a “*Baroque*” form, if not a Baroque invention. A three- or four-movement piece, tuneful and light, suitable for family home entertainment, the Trio Sonata normally featured two treble instruments: for example, violin and flute or oboe, with a bass instrument and harpsichord to fill out the harmonies. Instruments used would be whatever was available - home music-making was a popular pastime, and reached a high standard of proficiency.

Bach was not satisfied, however, to relegate the bass line to simple accompaniment. An early example of Bach’s Trio Sonatas may be found, surprisingly perhaps, in his Sonatas for Violin and Clavier, BWV 1014-1019 (*Baroque Music Collection* BACH 719-20), in which the “Trio” consists of Violin, plus the two hands of the Clavier score, each of the three having equal prominence, each participating equally in the fun, with the melody and counterpoint passing freely from one to the other.

The Six Trio Sonatas for Two Keyboards and Pedal (*für zwey Claviere und Pedal*) were composed much later, and in addition to equality between the three parts, provide an extra feature in the form of a severe technical challenge. Forkel, Bach’s first biographer, who drew heavily on the reminiscences of Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach, states categorically that Bach composed these Trio Sonatas in order to perfect the pedal technique of his son Wilhelm Friedemann, an objective which, as Forkel adds, appears to have been admirably achieved. Thus, despite the lively, tuneful character of these almost dance-like pieces, they do in fact conceal a wealth of technical difficulties - almost traps - for the player, particularly in demanding total independence of hands and feet. Already complex rhythms and note values are set in deliberate conflict as between hands and feet. Many professional organists find that practice on the Pedal-Harpsichord enhances the precision of their organ technique, and in particular, performances of these trio Sonatas attest quite freely to the technical demands made by these deceptively simple works.

Bach’s title of “*Two Keyboards and Pedal*” can include the Organ, Pedal-Harpsichord, or Pedal-Clavichord, both of the two latter instruments being especially common in the homes of organists at that time. Organ practice was difficult in Baroque times; churches were cold and damp, and someone had to be cajoled or hired to work the pumps which supplied wind to the organ. A harpsichord with pedal-board, or a clavichord with the same, would permit the organist to practice both the manual and the pedal parts in the warmth and convenience of home.

Another point which may be made about the Pedal-Harpsichord, one on which once again there is wide agreement among those who play the instrument, is that it is much more demanding to play than the organ. The precision and clarity of the pedal-harpsichord, heard in close proximity to the player without the confusion of resonating acoustic, requires much greater precision. Several professional organists of high standing whom Oryx have recorded, feeling perfectly confident on the Organ, have quietly gone away for further practice when confronted with a Pedal-Harpsichord. Thus we may visualize these pieces being practiced and performed, with an increasing degree of accuracy and proficiency, in the Bach family home by Wilhelm Friedemann, quietly observed by Father who smiles to himself as his son, playing along nicely, suddenly stops, goes back, and starts to practice a particularly tricky passage over and over again.

There is however another dimension to these works, albeit speculative, which derives from the fact that they were composed in 1733, during a late period in Bach’s life at Leipzig when, his Cantata-writing having been largely accomplished, he was devoting himself more and more to his activities as director of the Collegium Musicum which performed regularly in Zimmermann’s Coffee House, situated in the fashionable Catherine Strasse.

The Concerts were given in a small Concert Hall within Zimmermann’s premises, probably under his auspices. During the Winter, the group played every Friday night, from 6 to 8pm, in Zimmermann’s Coffee House, while in the warmer months, the music was moved outdoors, to Zimmermann’s Coffee Garden “*in front of the Grimma Gate, on the Grimma Stone Road*” - so the address is given in contemporary reports, with summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm. Bach derived much pleasure from these Concerts, providing music for the

enjoyment - and occasionally challenge - of talented students and professionals, rather than for an often tiresome Church Council.

That Gottfried Zimmerman was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and most probably a competent musician, is indicated by the fact that, 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. 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 pedal-board, which would have provided Bach with an additional incentive to produce the tuneful and challenging Trio Sonatas for Two Manuals and Pedal for performance by himself, or Wilhelm Friedemann, before an appreciative, and no doubt impressed audience of music-lovers.

Other Pedal-Harpsichord recordings from the ORYX Baroque Music Collection.

BMC 25: Bach and Buxtehude played by **Lionel Rogg**, *Wittmayer and Feldberg Pedal-Harpsichords.*

BACH 707: Bach in Weimar - Organ Transcriptions by Bach: **Martin Neary**, *Organ and Feldberg Pedal-Harpsichord*, **Nicholas Danby** - *Tocatta & Fugue in d minor, Pedal-Harpsichord*

BACH 726: Harpsichord Toccatas BWV 910-915, **Isolde Ahlgrim**, *Ammer Pedal-Harpsichord.*

BACH 727: Fantasies and Fugues, **Nicholas Danby** and **Isolde Ahlgrim**, *Feldberg and Ammer Pedal-Harpsichords (inc. the Passacaglia & Fugue in c, BWV 582).*

BACH 760-761: The Art of The Fugue on the Pedal-Harpsichord - BWV 1080 - Isolde Ahlgrim, *Ammer Pedal-Harpsichord* - and also **The Musical Offering - BWV 1079**